

88

Ballantine
Novel
27053
65p

A color photograph of three women, the main characters of Charlie's Angels, standing outdoors. The woman on the left has dark, wavy hair and is wearing a white collared shirt. The woman in the middle has blonde, wavy hair and is wearing a dark, textured jacket. The woman on the right has dark, wavy hair and is wearing a black turtleneck with a thin gold chain necklace. They are all looking towards the camera with serious expressions. The background shows a tree trunk and some greenery.

Charlie's Angels

**NOW A RIVETING ITV-TV HIT SERIES!
A MYSTERIOUS MASTERMIND AND HIS
3 SEXY SUPER-SLEUTHS
DELIVER A LOW BLOW TO HIGH CRIME!**

Created and Written by
IVAN GOFF and **BEN ROBERTS**

Adapted by **MAX FRANKLIN**

Never take a glass of milk from a stranger . . .

By the light from the hallway they could see the girl lying on her back, covered to her chin, her eyes closed. **The glass on the silver tray beside the bed was empty.** Creel lightly touched the girl's forehead. When there was no reaction, he flicked the tip of her nose with a forefinger. There was still no reaction. Taking hold of the covers, he flipped them over the foot of the bed to expose the girl in a semi-transparent shorty nightgown.

Glancing around at Rachel in the doorway, he said sardonically, "Little bitty nightgown like that, she could catch her death . . . just like her daddy did."

CHARLIE'S ANGELS

Dynamic adventure as TV's troublesome trinity untangle the threads of a wine country crime.

Watch for

CHARLIE'S ANGELS

#2:

The Killing Kind

published by Ballantine Books

CHARLIE'S ANGELS

Created and Written by

**Ivan Goff
and
Ben Roberts**

Adapted by
Max Franklin

Now a new ITV-TV Series

Starring
Kate Jackson
Farrah Fawcett-Majors
Jaclyn Smith
and
David Doyle

A SPELLING-GOLDBERG PRODUCTION

20170223

BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

Copyright © 1977 by Spelling-Goldberg Productions

Cover photograph © American Broadcasting Companies, Inc.

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada by Ballantine Books of Canada, Ltd., Toronto, Canada.

ISBN 0-345-27053-3

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Edition: January 1977

First Special Printing: January 1977

One

The stable attendant picked up the ringing phone and said, "Stables."

A cultured male voice answered, "Miss Sabrina Duncan, please."

"She's out riding," the attendant said. Then he glanced through the open stable door and saw a horse and rider on the equestrian trail a quarter of a mile away on the other side of a sparsely wooded area. "Just a minute. I just spotted her. Maybe I can signal her in."

Setting down the phone, he went outdoors and emitted a shrill, penetrating whistle. Reining in her trotting horse, the rider looked that way. When the attendant waved his arms, then made a beckoning gesture, she waved back in acknowledgment.

The attendant returned to the stable, picked up the phone, and said into it, "Be here in a minute."

It was a good mile and a quarter back to the stables by the winding equestrian trail, but only a quarter of a mile as the crow flew. The trouble was that the across-country route was pretty rough. Sabrina Duncan chose the shorter route anyway. Trotting the big chestnut stallion a few yards away from the five-foot-high wooden fence edging the trail, she urged him forward again at a gallop.

He cleared the fence easily, cleared a fallen log just beyond it, and a narrow stream just beyond the log without slowing his headlong pace, and raced between the trees toward the stables. The rider sometimes bent low to avoid being swept from the saddle by tree branches, sometimes rode erect, but always

rode with the grace of one born to the saddle. She was a tall, lovely, clear-eyed brunette with the patrician air of a princess, but without the subtle arrogance usually present in royalty.

At the other end of the wooded area the chestnut soared over a fence again, and galloped into the stable area. The girl reined to a halt next to the waiting attendant, tossed him the reins as she slid from the saddle, and ran inside to the phone.

"Hello," she said breathlessly.

"It's Charlie, angel," the cultured voice said. "Time to go to work."

"When?" she asked.

"Let's make it at cocktail time," Charlie said. "Five o'clock."

"All right," Sabrina said. "That will give me time to get pretty."

"John tells me you're always pretty, angel."

Before she could reply, there was a click and the phone went dead.

A few miles away at the Westwood Racquet Club, ash-blond Jill Munroe was improving her tennis game by returning balls shot at her from an automatic ball server. As the device catapulted one ball after another at her, she expertly forehanded or backhanded it across the net onto the side of her non-existent opponent. As lovely as Sabrina Duncan, she too had that indefinable something about her sometimes called breeding, but more commonly and more colloquially simply labeled "class."

When a phone at the edge of the court rang, Jill instantly dropped her racquet and ran to answer it. The balls continued to spurt from the automatic server and bounce against the backstop.

"Hello," the blond said into the phone.

"It's Charlie, angel," the cultured voice said. "Time to go to work."

"When?"

"Fiveish all right?"

"Just fine," she said. "Will you be there this time?"

"Aren't I always?"

"I mean in person."

"You know what curiosity did to the cat, angel. Try to curb it."

The phone went dead.

In a gymnasium in downtown Los Angeles, Kelly Garrett worked out on the parallel bars. She was a slim, soft-featured girl with dark brown hair and dancing eyes. Like Sabrina and Jill, she could have passed as a princess, but just a shade more earthy a princess.

She was balanced on her hands, her feet in the air and her back curved in a graceful arc when a gym attendant came over and said, "Phone, Miss Garrett."

Gracefully swinging her feet to the floor, Kelly ducked beneath the bar to her right and ran to the office. Picking up the phone lying on the desk, she said, "Hello."

"It's Charlie, angel. Time to go to work."

"All right, Charlie. When?"

"Five." Charlie's voice became faintly chiding. "I had to guess where you were, angel. You didn't have the tape switched on."

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said contritely. "It's been so long since you called, I guess I got careless."

"The deal was that I can *always* reach you, angel."

"I said I was sorry, Charlie. It won't happen again."

"All right, angel. Five o'clock."

He hung up.

The three girls known as Charlie's Angels were all as feminine as they looked, but it was by no means a helpless femininity. All three were graduates of the Los Angeles Police Academy. Their stints as police-women had established records for briefness, though. They had graduated together, and were still brand-new recruits when they were individually approached

by a man named John Bosley, who made each the identical and unrefusable offer.

John Bosley was a cheerful, round-faced, slightly plump man of fifty, with a full head of dark hair, neatly parted and worn moderately short. His proposition was that the girls resign from the LAPD to work for a man he identified only as Charlie. Their jobs would require only periodic duty, with more time off than work, but they would have to be available for immediate call to duty at all times. Each would be furnished a phone attachment on which she would be required to tape-record exactly where she could be reached every time she left home. Bosley told them that while the work might be dangerous at times, they would never be required to do anything illegal. They would never meet Charlie personally, although they would often talk to him on the phone. Their contact with their employer would always be through Bosley.

The inducement that made this strange proposition unrefusable was the salary, which was considerably higher than they could ever expect to earn as police-women. At Police Academy they had become close friends, and they discussed Bosley's proposition at length before accepting it. It wasn't that any of them had any real doubts about the advantages of the offer, but only that there was tacit agreement that they would either all accept, or none would. The final vote for acceptance was unanimous.

In a quiet section of Beverly Hills there was a square, two-story building of white stucco and old-fashioned design. A bronze plaque to the left of high brass-bound oaken double doors read simply PRIVATE INVESTIGATIONS. Just before five P.M., Scott Woodville parked his coupe in front of the building and lifted the attaché case from the seat alongside him.

Woodville was a tall, muscular man with a rather handsome face, bald on top but with a ring of curling hair circling his head above the ears. He entered the building into a high-ceilinged entry hall.

Round-faced John Bosley was just descending the stairs opposite the front door when he came in. Woodville halted, glanced at the closed sliding door leading into the inner sanctum, then gave Bosley an inquiring look.

Bosley waited until he got all the way down the stairs before saying, "They're inside."

"Good," Woodville said approvingly. "Charlie'll be calling any minute." Opening the attaché case, he removed a slide-photo cartridge and handed it to the plump man. "Will you set up the projection machine?"

"Right," Bosley agreed. Then his tone became slightly pettish. "I suppose I'm to be left behind again to do the really heavy stuff. Look after the office, answer the phone, pick up the mail."

Smiling, Woodville said, "Sorry, Bosley," but there was more amusement than apology in his tone.

Bosley slid open the sliding door and allowed Woodville to precede him into the room. He slid it closed again behind him.

The room was large, thickly carpeted, and expensively furnished. Although there was a desk with a telephone on it, it was more of a drawing room than an office. There was a sofa, several over-stuffed chairs, end tables, a large cocktail table, and a bar in one corner. A number of original and extremely valuable oils hung on the walls.

Blonde Jill Munroe was seated in an easy chair, leafing through a magazine. Kelly Garrett was seated in the center of the sofa, putting together a Chinese interlocking puzzle on the cocktail table before the sofa. The patrician Sabrina Duncan was distributing stemmed glasses containing frothy, golden-colored cocktails she had just mixed in the blender at the bar.

Woodville said, "Good afternoon, ladies. You're all looking very chipper. Ready for the launching pad?"

Sabrina finished handing out drinks and returned to the bar, where she had left her own. "Any idea what this is all about, Woodville?" she asked.

John Bosley got a slide projector and a screen from a closet and began setting them up. Woodville said, "Charlie will let you know when he calls."

"Why does it always have to be on the phone?" Jill asked in a petulant voice. "Why can't we ever see him?"

Woodville said in a polite but definite tone, "I believe that was very clearly spelled out when you were hired. Charlie is a very private person."

"I know," Jill said dryly. "But to work for a man you've never laid eyes on seems so—impersonal."

Woodville gave her a humorless smile. "And you, Miss Munroe, would like to make it personal?"

"Be a pal," Jill said with a touch of wheedling in her voice. "I've spent I don't know how many hours lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, trying to put a face and a body on that voice."

Unmoved, Woodville said, "Beats watching the late show, I imagine."

He moved over to the projection machine, which Bosley now had finished setting up. There was a telephone squawkbox combination next to the machine. Woodville looked at his watch.

Sabrina carried her drink over from the bar to seat herself on the sofa next to Kelly. As she passed Jill, she said in a low voice, "Don't tell me you're falling for Charlie."

"A voice on the telephone?" Jill said. "Don't be silly."

The phone rang.

"Here we go," Woodville said. Picking it up, he said into it, "All present and accounted for, sir."

Charlie's voice said warmly, "Thank you, Woodville. Sabrina, how was the class reunion?"

"Unreal," Sabrina said with a short, sardonic laugh. "Only five years, and we hardly recognized each other. Everything's changed except Philadelphia."

The voice from the squawkbox said, "Didn't you ever read *You Can't Go Home Again*? Kelly, are you

still seeing that young sergeant in Robbery and Homicide?"

"He's now an inspector. Yes, I'm still seeing him."

The voice from the squawkbox became arch. "Do I hear wedding bells?"

"I'm just a little girl from Iowa, Charlie. Down on the farm we don't move as fast as the LAPD."

Charlie chuckled. "Keep that innocent farmer's daughter act for your inspector, angel. You can't snow old Charlie. Jill, how's the painting coming?"

The blonde Jill said, "It isn't painting this week, Charlie. I bought one of those cooking encyclopedias."

Charlie chuckled again. "It's hard to keep up with you."

"I've gotten as far as B." Her tone became inviting. "My beef Stroganoff isn't bad, Charlie."

"Let me know when you get to zucchini. Are we ready, Bosley?"

"All set, sir."

Bosley threw a switch, the lights dimmed, and the screen lighted up.

Two

Charlie's voice said, "This is a tough one, angels. Doubt that I could do it myself, even if I wanted to. Needs the feminine touch. Woodville?"

The bald man picked up the oblong device at the end of a cable leading from the projection machine and pressed a button. A color slide was projected onto the screen. It was an aerial view of lush vineyards stretching for thousands of acres. In the foreground was a palacelike mansion with wide concrete steps

leading from a circular driveway up to a pillared front porch.

The voice from the squawkbox said, "This will be your scene of operations. The Samarra Vineyards, in the Valley of the Moon. Fifteen thousand acres of the finest wine country in California."

Woodville pressed the button again and a closeup of an oil portrait hanging on a wall appeared. It was of a distinguished-looking gray-haired man.

Charlie's voice said, "It was founded by this man, Vincent LeMaire, who vanished seven years ago, and whose whereabouts are unknown to this day."

"Any theories?" Sabrina asked.

"No evidence of foul play, no ransom demand, no farewell note. Simply disappeared without a trace."

Jill said, "But you think there's more to it?"

"Let's say our client is convinced that Vincent LeMaire was murdered."

Kelly asked, "Who's the client, Charlie?"

"All in good time. Woodville?"

The slide changed to a long shot of a woman seen through open French windows. Slim, with soft brown hair framing an even-featured face, at that distance she appeared extremely attractive. But when another slide appeared on the screen, this time from the point of view of about ten feet outside the window, she looked a little shopworn. In the second slide she was in the act of pouring a glass of wine at a small bar.

Apparently the photographer had been using a zoom lens, because the next slide was a closeup of the woman, just as she raised the wine glass to her lips. The closeup cruelly exposed the ravages of time on what must have once been real beauty. There were lines etched at the corners of the eyes and the mouth, a pinched expression on the face, and the nostrils flared in eagerness for the wine, suggesting that she might be a compulsive drinker.

Charlie's voice said, "Samarra is now the responsibility of Rachel LeMaire, Vincent's second wife. But she isn't equipped to handle the job. Unfortu-

nately, she's become too fond of the stuff they bottle."

"How does she manage?" Sabrina asked.

"With the help of this man."

The closeup of Rachel LeMaire was replaced by a shot of a Mercedes convertible driving between rows of grapevines. At the wheel was a blond man in his thirties. Next to him sat Rachel, again appearing attractive because it was a medium-distance shot. The photograph had been taken from the left side of the car, and had caught her full-face because she was examining the driver's profile with an admiring look on her face.

Another slide clicked into place, this one showing a front-view closeup of the blond man from the waist up. This time the zoom lens made the subject look better instead of worse. His square-cut features were extremely handsome, although there was a touch of cruelty in the face, and his body appeared to be hard and muscular.

"Beau Creel," Charlie's voice said. "First job at Samarra, truck driver. Then foreman. Now he has the run of the house."

"The *whole* house?" Jill asked.

"Every room."

Sabrina said dryly, "I hate a man without ambition."

The voice from the squawkbox said, "Watch out for Beau Creel, angels. The people who work for him can tell you what he's like. A great white shark."

Jill said thoughtfully, "Charlie, you said LeMaire's *second* wife."

"Very good, Jill. Woodville?"

Another slide appeared on the screen, this one of a woman in her late thirties with her arm about a girl of perhaps ten. Both were dark haired and attractive, and their features resembled each other's.

Charlie's voice said, "The first Mrs. LeMaire, originally from Brighton, England. The little girl is their only child, Janet. Unfortunately, the photograph is eleven years old. None later is available."

"What happened to them?" Kelly asked.

"There was a rather messy divorce, involving the present Mrs. LeMaire. Vincent made a generous settlement, and the first Mrs. LeMaire went back to England with her daughter."

"Where are they now?" Kelly asked.

"The mother died a year or two later. Janet passed from one member of the family to another. But none of her relatives seemed to own cameras. There are no photographs of her after she left the States with her mother. We do have some others of her at ten years old, however."

Woodville pressed the slide-changing button and a full-length photograph of the little girl appeared. She was dressed in a pink party dress, complete with white gloves and a straw bonnet with a pink ribbon. That slide changed to a closeup, without the hat.

Charlie's voice said, "The relatives she lived with were mostly elderly, and kept dying off, which is why she moved so often. By the time she was old enough to go out on her own, no one in her mother's family was left for whom she had any particular attachment. So the family lost contact with her. She's out there now, somewhere in the world. That's where you come in, angels."

The screen went blank and Bosley turned up the lights. Woodville set down the slide-changing switch, and Bosley unplugged the projector.

The voice from the squawkbox said, "Woodville will brief you. He has every scrap of information you'll need. Make sure you're letter-perfect."

Bosley, in the act of putting away the folded-up screen in the closet, said, "Charlie, I was just wondering if I could—"

Charlie cut him off. "Not as of now, Bosley." Then he added lightly, "But don't give up hope."

Resignedly the plump man went over to pick up the projector and carry it to the closet. As he closed the closet door, Jill asked, "Where will you be, Charlie?"

"Where I always am, with my nose to the grind-

stone. The waters run deep in this case, and I'm up to my hips right now."

Actually he was up to his chest, because he was sitting in a whirling Jacuzzi bath. As he hung up the poolside phone, a gorgeous blonde in a bikini moved toward him with an inviting smile on her face and a tinkling iced drink in her hand. Stooping next to him, she handed him the drink.

"Here you are, Charlie."

"Bless you, my dear," he said appreciatively.

Many miles to the north, in the Valley of the Moon, Beau Creel was driving the Mercedes convertible with its top down along one of the narrow roads crisscrossing the Samarra Vineyards. His gaze swept over the grape-laden vines appreciatively. Soon this would be all his, he thought. Or at least half his. Eventually it might be all his, but that would have to wait a discreet period. A second disappearance too soon would be bound to raise official curiosity.

The LeMaire mansion loomed into sight. Atop a low, gradually climbing hill, it was magnificent but also lonely looking. Moments later he turned onto the curving driveway, parked at the bottom of the steps, and athletically leaped from the car without bothering to open the door. He ran up the wide stone stairway two steps at a time, not because he was in any particular hurry, but because he was full of restless energy.

Inside, Rachel LeMaire was descending the stairs from the second floor to the entry hall. She was gripping the right-hand banister tightly, and was placing her feet with the elaborate caution of the slightly drunk. She wore an apricot-colored wedding gown. When she heard the Mercedes drive up, she began to hurry and nearly lost her footing, but her grip on the banister saved her from falling.

Recovering her balance, she reached the bottom of the stairs before Creel came in, and stopped before a mirror in the entry hall to adjust her hair. She

heard the front door open and close, but pretended to be unaware of Creel's presence until she saw his reflection in the mirror behind her.

Turning in simulated surprise, she said, "Beau! You weren't supposed to see this dress until the wedding day." Her tone turned coy. "But since you have, do you like it?"

He examined her briefly, then bent his head to sniff her breath. Frowning, he said, "I thought I told you to lay off the sauce." Abruptly turning, he headed through the archway into the living room. "Did you sign the payroll checks?"

Following after him, she said, "Yes, they're on the table."

The living room was huge, and was elaborately furnished with genuine Louis XIV furniture. Creel went over to a gracefully carved table whose legs ended in lion's paws. Picking up a stack of checks, he riffled through them to make sure all were signed.

Halting next to him, Rachel said, "I—I only had one, Beau. And it is the cocktail hour. Do you like the color of my dress?"

Giving her another brief glance, he said, "It's fine. Now take it off and hang it up."

Rachel looked hurt. "This is what we've been waiting for, isn't it? On Saturday it'll be seven years. He'll be legally dead." Her eyes brightened. "I'll be free!"

Stuffing the checks into his hip pocket, Beau studied her broodingly. "Seven years," he said in a tone that made it sound like seven centuries. "It was going to be an easy wait. Then we'd be sitting up here on the hill, owning everything as far as we could see."

She looked even more hurt. "It hasn't been a bad seven years. And it's almost over."

"Maybe."

"What do you mean, maybe? Nothing's going to happen."

His expression became sardonic. "Aren't you for-

getting the will and that stupid premarital agreement you signed? What if she shows up?"

"Beau, we've been through all this," Rachel said in a distracted voice.

"All because of a crummy book of matches," he said with sudden anger. "You tell him you're going to spend a weekend in Frisco with your sister, and when you come back he finds a crummy book of matches from a motel in Riverside!"

"How could I know he'd go searching through my room?" she asked pleadingly.

"Through your *closet*, Rachel. Probably looking for the bottle you'd stashed away."

Stiffening her back, she glared at him. "I don't have to stand for that. You can go too far, Beau. After all, I am Rachel LeMaire, and this is *my* place."

Beau Creel had no desire to throw seven years of hard work down the drain at this late date. And it had been hard work. Running an enterprise the size of Samarra Vineyards was a never-ending job, with lots of unpaid overtime. Without him to manage the place for her, he was sure Rachel would long since have run it into the ground. He had kept it as prosperous as when the old man was running it. He felt he deserved it.

In a soothing tone he said, "I'm sorry, honey. I've been uptight for a long time. Always wondering if she'd come waltzing in here, and wait around for D day so she could throw us out on our ears."

Instantly Rachel melted. "Nothing like that's going to happen, Beau. On Saturday it'll be all ours."

She had said "ours," not "mine," he noted with satisfaction. Smiling at her, he said, "And on Sunday you'll be standing beside me in that pretty dress."

He took her into his arms, and she slid her arms about his neck. "It was worth the wait, wasn't it?" she asked.

Kissing her on the nose, he said, "What do you think?"

Three

When Scott Woodville hung up the phone and switched off the squawkbox, the three angels looked at him expectantly. Walking over to stand before them, he clasped his hands behind him, as though he were a professor beginning a lecture. John Bosley went over to stand behind the sofa, so that he could get in on the briefing.

Woodville started off, "As Charlie mentioned, the divorce between Vincent LeMaire and his first wife was messy. Janet LeMaire's mother was extremely bitter, and she did what many rejected women do. She used the child as a weapon. She taught Janet to hate her father."

"I wondered why she didn't return to live with her father after her mother died," Jill said. "That answers it."

Woodville nodded. "Her father did everything he could to induce the child to return, but she refused every overture, including the will."

"The will?" Sabrina asked.

"He had a will drawn up and mailed her a copy. It stipulated that she inherited his entire estate, less fifty thousand dollars to go to his second wife, Rachel, providing she returned to live at Samarra before he died. If she didn't return, everything went to Rachel."

"Could he do that?" Bosley asked. "Can you cut a spouse out of your will? Or a daughter, for that matter?"

"The will was part of a premarital agreement with Rachel. The divorce litigation was so long drawn

out, and back then the interlocutory period in California was a full year, so the decree became final only a few days after Janet's mother died, even though by then they had been broken up for two years. That changed things. Vincent had given up all hope of ever seeing his daughter again, but with her mother dead, he immediately filed for custody. Unfortunately for him, Janet's mother had resumed her British citizenship, had declared her daughter a British subject, and on her deathbed had designated her elderly sister and brother-in-law as Janet's guardians. The English courts rejected her father's claim. Meantime Vincent had cagily held off marrying Rachel in order to keep an ace in the hole in the event his custody suit failed. On the eve of what she expected to be a marriage into wealth, she was confronted with the will, and a codicil to it in the form of a premarital agreement accepting the will's terms. She objected, but Vincent bluntly informed her that his daughter was important enough to him so that if she didn't sign, there was going to be no marriage. She signed."

Bosley said, "That answers only half my question. Can you really disinherit a daughter? I thought that was just something that happened in fiction."

"Oh, you can do it," Woodville assured him. "The child of a decedent can rather easily break a will if not mentioned at all, but if a specific sum is left, there is no claim to any larger amount unless it can be shown that the testator was either incompetent or under duress at the time the will was drawn. The will provided the token sum of five hundred dollars for Janet in the event she failed to return to Samarra before Vincent died."

"Isn't this all academic anyway?" Kelly asked. "Didn't Vincent disappear years ago?"

Smiling approvingly at the question, Woodville said, "Seven years ago this coming Saturday. Which, unless he reappears, is the day he will be declared legally dead."

Jill said in a tone of enlightenment, "Then if Janet

shows up before Saturday, she'll qualify as the sole heir."

"Exactly."

"Is she going to?"

"By proxy. Circumstances make it impossible for the *real* Janet LeMaire to appear in time. She's in a hospital in Algiers."

"Seriously ill?" Sabrina asked.

Woodville smiled again. "Measles."

"Measles!" the three girls and Bosley said together.

"She's expected to recover with no aftereffects. But you can't enter the United States with a communicable disease, even in a chartered plane and taking all quarantine precautions, unless you're a United States citizen returning home for treatment. And Janet is a British subject. She has declared herself an American citizen—a natural-born American has that right when she reaches the age of twenty-one, if her citizenship was changed as a minor—but the papers haven't gone through yet. Saturday is only five days off, and there is no way she can get to Samarra by then."

Kelly said, "One of us is going to be Janet?"

"You guessed it," Woodville affirmed. "You're going to be the first Janet, Kelly."

"The *first*?"

"Uh-huh. You're going to be exposed as a fraud. Then Sabrina will appear as the *real* Janet."

"Sounds complicated," Sabrina said. "But before you explain it, I have a question."

"Go ahead."

"Eventually, when the *real* real Janet finally shows up, I'm bound to be exposed as a fraud also. So how can Janet inherit?"

"She can't under the terms of the will. But if the will is invalidated, and Rachel is barred from inheriting, Janet will be the only remaining living heir."

John Bosley said, "I don't follow that, Woodville. If the will is invalidated, that means he died intestate, for all practical purposes. And the widow can't

be barred from inheriting her fair share of the estate.”
“Under one set of circumstances she can,” Woodville informed him. “The law refuses to let anyone profit from murder. If we can prove that Vincent LeMaire was murdered, and establish that Rachel was party to the murder, she loses all right to inherit.”

“Wow!” Jill said. “How do we do that?”

“We think we know where he’s buried. Not precisely, but the general area. We’re going to try to induce his killers to dig him up. We plan to charge them for the privilege, too. A quarter of a million dollars.”

“I don’t follow that, either,” Bosley said fretfully.

“From his preliminary investigation, that’s what Charlie figures Beau Creel, with the help of the LeMaire family lawyer, has skimmed off the top of Samarra’s profits during the past seven years. Charlie thinks it would be a nice touch to make them cough *it up before we take everything away from them.*”

“Charlie has always been one for poetic justice,” Kelly murmured. “Not to mention money.”

Woodville crossed to the desk, where he had left his attaché case, and withdrew two large manila envelopes from the case. Returning to the girls, he handed one to Kelly and the other to Sabrina.

Blonde Jill said, “None for me?”

“You don’t have any homework this time, Jill, although you do have an assignment.” Woodville turned back to the other two girls. “Ladies, herein you will find photographs and dossiers on everyone you are likely to encounter at Samarra who was around at the time Janet left there. There is also a map of the mansion in each envelope, photographs of each room, and notes on what furniture and other items are new since Janet left. Finally, there is a detailed biography of Janet up to the age of ten, including every event she could think of, important or trivial, that anyone at the mansion may mention.”

“Charlie got that from her?” Sabrina asked.

Woodville nodded. "By transatlantic phone. You should see the phone bill."

"Charlie is always so thorough," Jill said. "Couldn't you tell us one teensy little thing about him? His age, for instance?"

"I suppose I could do that," Woodville conceded.

"How old is he?" Jill asked eagerly.

"Over twenty-one."

Jill glared at him indignantly. "That's not funny, Woodville."

"I thought it was mildly amusing," the bald man said modestly. "Now you ladies better get home. You have until tomorrow morning to memorize everything in those envelopes. Incidentally, Kelly, do you know how to ride a motorcycle?"

"We all do. They taught us at the Police Academy."

"Good. I think we'll send you to Samarra by that mode of transportation, then. I'll arrange for the cycle, but you'll have to pick yourself up a helmet. You should also have a leather jacket, jeans, and boots, but they shouldn't look new. You want to look as though you've been doing a lot of traveling."

"I can put something together," Kelly told him.

"All right," Woodville said crisply. "That's all for now. Report back here at eight A.M.."

The girls knew better than to ask for more details, because from previous experience they knew they would get them as Woodville deigned to dole them out. But Bosley had one question.

"How about me?" he asked. "Do I have any kind of assignment in this?"

"Of course, Bosley," Woodville said. "Charlie wants you to mind the store."

Forty acres of the fifteen thousand acres of the Samarra Vineyards was useless for growing grapes. The southeast corner was swampland. Six months previously Beau Creel, as manager of the vineyards, had executed a clever deal by selling the useless forty acres, sight unseen, to a retired Arizona grocer

who thought he was buying farmland. When Cedric Hawkins and his wife arrived from Arizona to settle on their new farm, their initial reaction had been outrage. When their demand for their money back was politely but definitely refused, they took the sales contract to a lawyer to find out if they had grounds for suit. He assured them it was ironclad.

With most of their assets tied up in the swamp-land, the elderly couple simply had to make the best of a bad deal. They used most of their remaining assets to build a two-room shack at the edge of the swamp, and moved in. Hawkins never entirely gave up, though. Whenever he ran into Beau Creel, he badgered him about buying the forty acres back.

On Tuesday morning the vineyard manager drove down to the southeast section to check on the pickers working there. Spotting the Mercedes convertible parked only fifty yards from his cabin, Cedric Hawkins walked over to it. He was a tall, spare man in his late sixties with a thin, bitter face. He reached the car just as Creel finished giving instructions to the pickers and headed back toward it.

Spotting the elderly man standing there, Creel halted and said resignedly, "Yes, Mr. Hawkins?"

"You know what I want, Mr. Creel," Hawkins said aggrievedly.

Creel nodded. "You want the Samarra Vineyards to buy back your forty acres. Sorry. We have all the acreage we need."

"You sold me forty acres of swamp under the guise of it being rich farmland," Hawkins said heatedly.

Beau Creel gave him a deliberately cruel smile. "I only wrote you that Samarra Vineyards had some of the richest land in California. I didn't say it was *all* rich land. Maybe you should have come from Arizona to look it over before you signed the papers."

"I put my life savings into this deal. Borrowed the rest from the bank. I've tried to make a go of it, but what does a man do with nothing but mud and

black slime? All you can grow on this land is more swamp."

"The fishing in the bayous is nice, isn't it?" Creel said.

Hawkins made a hopeless gesture. "Anna and I talked it over. We got to get out, even if it means a big loss. I gave you twenty thousand. Give me half and you can have it back."

"Ten thousand?" Creel said. "Little high for swampland."

Brushing past the man, he climbed into the convertible and drove off. Hawkins gazed after him in silent rage.

Four

The leader of the group working near the Hawkins shack was a handsome, dark-complexioned man in his mid-twenties with a muscular build. He had been leaning against the fender of a pickup truck, watching the tableau between Hawkins and Creel. He wasn't close enough to hear what was said, but he could imagine what the conversation was about, because the trick Beau Creel had pulled on the old man was common knowledge among the workers.

When the convertible drove off, the group boss said to the big German shepherd lying at his feet, "What they call the old brush-off, Mike. Beau Creek shafted the old man, and he's not about to unshaft him."

A middle-aged Mexican-American stopped work to come over and take a drink of water from a bucket in the back of the pickup truck. Stooping

to pick up a handful of dirt after getting his drink, he rolled it between his fingers.

"The plants are growing well, Aram," he said. "It'll be a good year for Samarra. Lots of money."

"For those two up in the house, maybe," Aram Kellegian said sourly. "But, Miguel, how do we get some of it to roll down the hill?"

Miguel shrugged. "Things are not like they were under Señor LeMaire. But all things must change, Aram."

He went back to work.

Tuesday afternoon a Kawasaki 400 motorcycle raced through the main gate of the Samarra Vineyards and took the road leading up the hill to the mansion. The rider wore a helmet with a plastic visor, a black leather jacket, jeans, and low-cut cowboy boots. Twin saddlebags and a backpack suggested the rider was not just out for a spin, but had come some distance.

The motorcycle swept up the gentle curve of the driveway and came to a halt at the foot of the broad stone steps leading up to the porch. The rider lifted the face visor, but left on the helmet, kicked down the stand and got off the machine.

The front door opened and two men emerged. Both were large and overmuscled and in their mid-thirties. One had red hair worn in a crew cut, a pale, freckled face, and pale blue eyes as expressionless as a dead carp's. The other was swarthy, heavy featured and thick chested, and totally bald, and his eyes were just as expressionless. They came down the steps side by side, moving in matched stride like a pair of storm troopers. They came to a halt in unison on the bottom step.

"Help you, mister?" the freckled man asked in a tone that really meant, "You'd better have a good excuse for being here."

The rider lifted away the helmet, allowing long, shiny brown hair to tumble about her shoulders. The two men blinked, then, realizing the girl was re-

markedly attractive, allowed their manners to thaw a little.

"Sorry, thought you were a guy," the freckled man said apologetically.

Kelly slipped off her backpack and laid it next to the bike. "I'd like to see Mrs. LeMaire," she said with a bright smile. "Is she in?"

"Who shall I tell her wants to see her?"

"Janet LeMaire."

The two men blinked again. The freckled man said unbelievably, "*Who'd* you say?"

"Janet LeMaire. I used to live here."

There was a period of stunned silence. Eventually the freckled man said huskily, "Wait here," then turned and ran back up the steps.

The other man remained where he was, gazing at Kelly warily. She gave him a bright smile.

"I don't recall you two," she said. "Do you work at Samarra now?"

The swarthy man merely nodded.

"What's your name?"

The man looked startled. After a moment he said grudgingly, "Abel Hicks."

"And your friend?"

"Rick Wilder."

"What do you two do around here?"

Abel Hicks considered this for a time. Eventually he said, "Different things."

Inside, Rick Wilder found Beau Creel and Rachel LeMaire in the living room going over some records together at the table with the lion's-paw legs.

"Girl outside says she's Janet LeMaire," the freckled man announced.

Both looked up at him, then at each other. Rachel turned pale. "What do we do?" she asked faintly.

"The first thing we do is not panic," he said. He looked up at Wilder again. "Bring her in."

When the freckled man had left again, Creel took Rachel's hand. "If she's really Janet, I'll take care of

her, so don't worry. You all right? Can you handle it?"

Rachel took a deep breath. "Could I have a drink?"

"No," he said definitely.

Taking another deep breath, she made an effort to compose herself. "All right, I'll manage."

Creel got to his feet, pulling her erect too. He gave her hand a little squeeze before releasing it.

"Just be nice to her," he said. "I'll take care of the rest."

Rick Wilder escorted Kelly into the room. Rachel moved forward to meet her, but Beau Creel remained standing by the table.

Rachel said, "You say you're Janet LeMaire?"

Kelly nodded. Glancing around, she said, "I hope you don't mind. I just wanted to see what it was like, the place where I was born."

Smiling with effort, Rachel said, "Of course I don't mind. The fact is, I've been wondering about you for a long time."

Kelly's gaze moved to the fireplace mantel. "What happened to the bust of Beethoven?"

Rachel glanced that way, too. "One of the servants broke it dusting. Your father was furious."

Creel said, "I don't suppose you remember me?"

Kelly cocked an eyebrow at him, then smiled. "Why, yes. You're Beau Creel. You drive one of my father's trucks."

"That was before you left," Creel said dryly. "I run the place now. For Mrs. LeMaire."

"How nice," Kelly said brightly.

Rachel asked, "How did you happen to come back just now?"

"I guess you could call it kind of a crazy impulse. I'd been out of touch with everything ever since I left England, rattling all over the world on my bike. Then, all of a sudden it was California, and I thought, *Home*, it's just over that hill!" She summoned another of her bright smiles. "And so here I am."

"Yeah," Creel said a trifle dourly. He gave Rachel

a look to make sure she caught the hint meant for her in his next words. "I'm sure you and Mrs. LeMaire will have lots to talk about in the next few days."

Rachel got the hint. She said to Janet, "You will stay, won't you?"

"Thank you," Kelly said, turning toward the door. "I'll just get my things."

"Don't bother, Miss LeMaire," Creel said. "I'll have them brought in."

He gestured to Wilder, who obediently left the room.

Rachel said, "I'll show you upstairs." Then she flushed slightly and said, "But of course you know the way."

"Of course," Kelly said, preceding her from the room.

In the entry hall Kelly waited at the bottom of the stairs for Rachel to catch up, and the two women ascended side by side.

Rachel said, "Janet—May I call you Janet?"

"I'd like that," Kelly said graciously.

"And I'm Rachel. You must be hot and tired. I'll bet a shower sounds good to you."

"Like heaven," Kelly told her.

"You can have your old room," Rachel said.

"Oh, how nice," Kelly said.

They had reached the top of the stairs. Kelly turned left without prompting and unerringly made her way to the second door on the far side of the hallway.

Downstairs Rick Wilder and Abel Hicks came in from outside carrying the two saddlebags and the backpack.

Beau Creel said quietly, "Let me have those."

The men set them on the floor in front of him. Stooping, he opened one of the saddlebags. He struck pay dirt instantly. Taking out a passport, he opened it. His mouth tightened as he read the name *Janet Lee LeMaire* and saw the photograph of Kelly.

Quickly he scanned the birthdate and other statistics, then riffled the pages.

"She's been all over hell and gone," he muttered, more to himself than the two watching men. "Switzerland, Germany, France, Italy. Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia. South America, Central America, and Mexico. Missed Russia and China."

Returning the passport to its place, he refastened the saddlebag strap, then gestured toward the stairs. Wilder picked up the two saddlebags, and the swarthy Hicks picked up the backpack.

As they started toward the stairs, Creel said softly, "Rick."

Wilder turned and came back. The swarthy man continued up the stairs.

"Yeah?" Rick said inquiringly.

"Get the servants out of the house. Give them the rest of the week off."

Nodding, the freckled man turned again and followed his partner up the stairs. Creel crossed to the archway opposite the one into the living room. This led into a game room. He went past a pool table to a bar, picked up the phone on it, and savagely punched out a number.

A feminine voice answered, "Henry Bancroft and Associates."

"Give me Mr. Bancroft," Creel said.

"Who is calling, please?"

"Beau Creel," he snarled. "Get him on."

"Just a moment, Mr. Creel," the woman said in a slightly shocked voice. "I'll see if he's in."

A moment later the smooth voice of the LeMaire family lawyer said, "What is it, Beau? My secretary says you sounded a little uptight."

"I have reason to be, Henry. We've got trouble. The LeMaire girl showed up."

"What?" Henry Bancroft said in a tone of shock. "Who showed up? What are you talking about?"

"Janet LeMaire."

There was a long silence before the lawyer whispered, "My God, you know what that means?"

"Take it easy," Creel said. "We haven't lost a thing yet. But you'd better get out here this second."

"I'm due in court," Bancroft protested.

"This second!" Creel said ominously, and hung up.

Upstairs, after Rachel left her alone in her room, Kelly took a leisurely shower. When she came from the bathroom, wrapped in a towel sarong-style, she slid back the closet door and probed in an inner pocket of her leather jacket. Withdrawing a small, compact CB radio, she extended the aerial and switched it on.

"Woodville, are you there?" she said into it.

"Yes," the bald man's voice came from the speaker. "How's it going?"

"Everything's fine. I'm all settled in."

"Good. If you need anything, just buzz."

"Will do," Kelly said. "Bye for now."

She switched off, retracted the aerial, and put the radio back in the inside pocket of her jacket. Glancing around, she saw that her saddlebags and backpack had been laid on the floor just inside the door. She began unpacking and hanging up clothes.

Five

Scott Woodville's car was parked on the shoulder of the road leading past the east edge of the swamp owned by Cedric Hawkins. After retracting the antenna of his CB radio and putting the radio in the glove compartment, he got out, rounded the car to its rear, and keyed open the trunk. Lifting out his attaché case, he slammed the lid again.

He walked to the north edge of the swamp, then

west on dry land along its north edge to the Hawkins cabin. Cedric Hawkins and his wife, Anna, were glumly sitting in rocking chairs on the front porch. Anna Hawkins was also in her late sixties, and was as lean and bitter looking as her husband.

The porch was raised only a foot off the ground, so there were no steps. Pausing at the edge of the porch, Woodville said politely, "Mr. and Mrs. Hawkins?"

Examining him warily, both merely nodded.

"My name is Scott Woodville, and I'm attorney for a Miss Jill Munroe. I understand you would like to sell this place."

The eyes of both lighted up. Hawkins said, "Yes, sir!"

"Miss Munroe is willing to buy it for what you have invested in it. My understanding is that you paid twenty thousand for the property and invested another twenty-five hundred in this, ah, building."

"That's right," Hawkins said eagerly. "Twenty-two thousand, five hundred we got in the place."

"Then you'll sell for that amount?"

"You bet your boots."

Stepping up onto the porch, Woodville opened his attaché case and took out a number of papers. He said, "I took the liberty of having a title search made, so that there won't be the delay of going through escrow." He showed the couple a certified check in the amount of \$22,500, made out to Cedric Hawkins, and a typed bill of sale. "If you have the deed handy, we can settle the matter right now."

"Deed's right inside," Hawkins said, jumping to his feet and hurrying through the door into the shack.

A moment later he came out clutching the deed in his hand. After examining it, Woodville set the attaché case on the porch railing to act as a desk, laid the bill of sale on it, and handed Hawkins a pen.

As the old man bent to sign, Woodville said,

"One thing. Part of the deal is that you must vacate the premises by tomorrow morning."

"Be out tonight," Hawkins said. "Be on the ten P.M. train to Phoenix."

He signed the paper.

When Woodville handed him the certified check in exchange for the bill of sale and the deed, Hawkins examined it carefully before putting it away in his pocket. Then he asked curiously, "What's this Miss Munroe want with a piece of swamp?"

"She's buying it for her grandfather. He grew up in a Louisiana bayou, and wants to retire to a similar place. Nostalgia, I suppose you could call it."

"You can call it anything you want for all of me," Hawkins said. "He's welcome to it." He turned to his wife. "Come on, Anna, let's start packing."

Henry Bancroft arrived at the mansion about the time Scott Woodville was saying good-bye to the Hawkinses. He was a slim, distinguished-looking man of middle age with graying sideburns and horn-rimmed glasses.

Beau Creel answered the door. Looking at him in surprise, the lawyer asked, "You serving as butler now?"

"We gave the servants a few days off," Creel said. "Come in."

Rachel LeMaire was seated in the living room. Pausing in the archway, Bancroft said, "Afternoon, Rachel."

"How are you, Henry?" she said.

The lawyer started into the room, but Creel grasped his arm. "It'll be more private in the game room, Henry," he said, steering him across the entry hall and through the other archway.

"Shouldn't Rachel be in on this?" Bancroft asked.

"No," Creel said in a definite tone. "Whatever we decide, she'll go along with. She doesn't have to be in on decisions."

He closed the sliding door to assure them privacy. Beau Creel had made no effort to lower his voice,

and Rachel heard what he said. Her face became pinched and she rose to go over to the small serving bar and pour herself a large glass of wine. Instead of sipping it, she drank it off like a shot of whiskey.

In the game room Henry Bancroft seated himself at the bar. Creel leaned an elbow on it, but remained standing.

"Where is this woman who claims to be Janet?" the lawyer asked.

"Upstairs taking a shower. I had Rachel invite her to stay over."

"How do you know she's the real girl?"

"Her passport."

Bancroft snorted. "You can buy a passport on the black market. For a couple of hundred dollars you can be whoever you want to be."

"That's why you're here," Creel told him. "You knew that kid from the day she was born. I want you to check her out."

"Why would she come back here after all these years at this particular time?"

Creel stated at him. "Isn't that a kind of silly question?"

Bancroft made an impatient gesture. "To meet the deadline before Saturday, of course. Obviously she's had some legal advice. But I mean why wait until we're almost to the wire? Why not years ago?"

"Who knows?" Creel asked with a shrug. "Maybe she didn't buy the fact that her old man just disappeared. Maybe she thought if she came back too soon the same thing could happen to her."

The lawyer gave him a sharp look. "Beau, I don't want to be party to any rough stuff."

The blond man examined him for a long time with something approaching contempt in his eyes. Eventually he said, "What do you think happens if she gets some fancy accountant to go through the books? And he finds out we've taken a quarter of a million off the top? I never heard you complain about your cut."

Bancroft ran a distracted hand through his hair. "I had some business reverses. I had no choice but to go along with you. But I have to draw the line somewhere."

"You're across the line, Henry. You're an accessory to murder."

The word terrified the lawyer. Glancing around in all directions to assure himself someone they hadn't noticed wasn't in the room, he said in a panicky voice, "I wasn't here that night. I can prove it."

"But when you found out, you forgot to tell the sheriff," Creel said with a cold smile. "Same thing." He cocked his head to listen. "Think I hear her coming down the stairs. Let's go check her out."

But when they got out to the entry hall, it was Rachel descending the stairs. Creel gave her an inquiring look.

"Just checking on our guest," Rachel said. "She's getting dressed and will be down in a minute."

"Then let's go into the living room to wait for her," Creel suggested.

In the living room Creel glanced around, centered his gaze on a high-backed chair near the fireplace, and went over to reposition it so that its back was to the archway. "Sit here, Henry," he invited.

Nodding understanding, the lawyer went over to seat himself in the chair. The back was high enough so that he couldn't be seen in it from the archway leading to the entry hall.

Glancing around again, Creel spotted the empty wineglass on the little service bar. His nostrils flared and he went over to bend his head and sniff Rachel's breath. "Can't you stay off the sauce even when we've got an emergency?" he growled at her.

"I only had one, Beau," she said defensively. "I'm terribly nervous about all this."

"If you don't keep your wits about you, you'll be worse than nervous," he spat. "You'll be out of Samarra on your butt. Now, I want *no* drinking from now on. Understand?"

"All right, Beau," she said meekly. "I won't touch another drop."

They heard someone descending the stairs. Creel made a gesture toward the door. Rachel walked over to the archway and looked out. Kelly was halfway down the stairs, dressed in a loose silk blouse, light tan slacks, and loafers in place of her cowboy boots. She smiled at Rachel, and Rachel smiled back.

As Kelly reached the bottom of the stairs, Rachel asked, "Do you have a moment, Janet?"

"Sure," Kelly said agreeably, pausing. "I thought I'd take a spin around the old place, but there's no hurry."

Looking her up and down, Rachel said, "You look very nice."

"Thank you."

Rachel waved her into the living room. Passing through the archway, Kelly glanced at Creel, then back at Rachel, with an inquiring look on her face. Then Henry Bancroft rose from the high-backed chair and turned to smile at Kelly.

"Hello, Janet," the lawyer said.

Kelly examined him doubtfully, and for a long moment it seemed as though she had not the faintest idea who he was. Then her expression cleared and she said with pleasure, "Why, Mr. Bancroft! How are you? Well, this is a surprise."

Bancroft said affably, "I'm just fine. And I'd say you're old enough now to call me Henry, Janet."

"All right, Henry. Do you still have that lovely old office on Warren Street?"

"Number seventeen," Bancroft said, nodding.

"Well, it's good to know some things never change."

The lawyer came over nearer and looked down into her face. "You know, Janet, I remember the day you turned six. You rode down to the office and showed me your new chestnut pony. Bunky, I think you called him."

Kelly considered this, her expression indicating concentration on trying to remember.

Beau Creel said to Bancroft, "I suppose that's going back a little far."

"Oh, no, I remember," Kelly said.

The lawyer gave Creel a significant look. Kelly said, "Except—"

"Except what?" Rachel asked, unable to bear the suspense longer.

"Forgive me, Henry, but it was my seventh birthday, the pony was a gray, and *her* name was Cindy. Remember?"

There was a palpable letdown among the three conspirators. Bancroft managed a smile with difficulty. "Come to think of it, you're right. I do seem to have gotten that all mixed up."

Creel said sourly, "Guess it *was* a long time ago."

Bancroft said, "Well, there's one thing I know I'm right about. The milk."

"The milk?" Rachel said.

"Janet's milk."

"Oh, you're talking about my *warm* milk," Kelly said.

The lawyer nodded. "At night."

Smiling at Rachel and Creel, Kelly said, "He's doing better. I had a glass of warm milk every night of my life before I went to sleep. Still do."

Rachel said with a brave attempt at graciousness, "I'll see that you have some tonight."

"Thank you."

"One thing, Rachel," Bancroft said. "Don't forget the cinnammon."

"No, no, Henry," Kelly said. "Nutmeg."

Then her expression showed that it had suddenly registered on her what was taking place. Her gaze made a circuit of the three, stopping on the lawyer's face.

In a hurt voice she said, "You've been testing me, haven't you? Why?"

It didn't occur to any of the three that the question effectively put a stop to any further testing. They were all too embarrassed at being caught in the act. Bancroft was the most embarrassed.

In a tone of apology he said, "I'm sorry, my dear. Please try to understand. After all, it's been eleven years, and we had to make certain you were, in truth, Janet LeMaire. As Rachel's attorney, I had to warn her of the possibility that some, ah, adventuress might show up about now."

"You mean before Saturday?" Kelly asked.

Beau Creel said, "You know about Saturday?"

"About my father's will? Of course. He sent me a copy years ago." She smiled at Rachel. "Before he married you. Actually it was only recently that I realized I was still eligible under the terms of the will, when I talked to a lawyer and learned that father was still legally alive until he had been missing seven years. He advised me to return and move in before Saturday."

Creel asked dourly, "Then why pretend you just dropped in out of the blue?"

Kelly made a circuit with her gaze again, this time stopping on Rachel. With just a faint touch of compassion, she said, "When I met you, and you were so kind, I didn't have the heart to tell you. I was hoping I could find the right words, but well, now that we're all such good friends, does it really matter? I mean, it doesn't have to be so different just because Samarra is going to belong to me. Rachel, I do hope you'll come and visit whenever you're in the neighborhood." She turned to Creel. "And, Beau, I hope you'll stay on. That is, if you don't mind taking orders from someone you probably still think of as a little girl."

Creel said in the same dour tone, "We'll talk about it, Miss LeMaire. After Saturday."

"Of course." Her gaze made still another circuit, this time accompanied by a bright smile. "Well, I'm off."

She started out, paused in the archway, and turned to say to Bancroft, "Henry, it's been marvelous seeing you again."

She continued on out. There was a leaden silence.

Finally Creel looked at Bancroft with faint hope in his eyes.

The lawyer shook his head. "It's Janet. No imposter could know those intimate little details."

The faint hope died. Looking at Rachel, Creel said, "You can *visit* her!"

Six

Aram Kellegian drove the pickup truck along the narrow dirt road between grape-laden vines. The German shepherd, Mike, sat on the seat next to him.

Glancing in both directions at the plump fruit, Aram said to the dog, "Lots of work still cut out for us, Mike, before it's all in."

Wagging his tail, Mike thrust his muzzle against Aram's neck.

Patting him on the snout, the dark youth said, "Back in your own corner, pal."

Obediently the dog moved over next to the window.

Aram started around a curve. As he completed rounding it, he saw a motorcycle no more than a hundred feet away bearing straight at him. He hadn't heard its approach because it was cruising at low speed.

The roads crisscrossing the vineyard were designed not for traffic, but merely for access to the vines, and were just barely wide enough for the trucks used to carry away the harvest. There was not enough room for the pickup truck and the motorcycle to pass each other. To complicate matters, the motorcycle driver was looking off to the left and failed to see the truck.

Aram hit the brakes and simultaneously blasted the horn. Startled, the driver swiveled her head forward to see the truck skidding directly at her.

Fortunately there was a crossroad at that point. The motorcycle swung into it a hair before the truck slid across the intersection. But the turn was too sharp for the driver to maintain control. The bike skidded out from under her, dumping her in a heap on the grass alongside the road.

As the truck screeched to a halt just beyond the intersection, Mike jumped out the window and raced back to nose the fallen girl. Aram climbed out his side and ran back also.

The girl, dazed but unhurt, lay on her back with the wind knocked out of her. When the dog licked her face, she pushed him away and sat up.

Kelly's head was still spinning when she sat up. But after a moment her vision cleared and she became conscious of a handsome, dark-complexioned man a couple of years older than she was standing over her. Then the dog licked her face again, and she raised a protective arm to fend him off.

"Back off, Mike!" the young man ordered.

The big German shepherd backed a foot, and stood wagging his tail.

"You all right?" the man asked in a concerned voice.

"I'm just getting ready to check," Kelly said. Climbing to her feet, she tested her arms and legs, then looked up with a grin. "I think I'm all in one piece."

"Smudge of dirt on your nose," the man said.

Taking a handkerchief from her slacks pocket, Kelly rubbed her nose, then looked at him inquiringly.

"Got it," he said. He looked her over judiciously, making a complete circle. "Brush the dirt off the seat of your pants and you'll be good as new."

As she brushed, he said, "I guess we ran out of road."

"My fault," Kelly said. "I was sightseeing instead of paying attention to my driving."

He walked over to the bike, lying on its side ten yards away. Kelly had instinctively cut the throttle as it started to skid from under her, and the motor had stopped. The man righted it, examined it briefly then wheeled it back to her and kicked down the stand.

"Bike seems okay," he said.

Kelly checked it over in a little more detail, then straightened and said ruefully, "Funny. I jockey that bronco halfway around the world, and the first time it throws me is when I come home."

He looked at her curiously. "You live around here?"

"I did when I was a child. In the house on the hill."

His eyes widened, and a mixed expression of pleasure and hope appeared on his face. "You're not Janet LeMaire?"

"Yes."

He looked at her with a strange smile on his face. *He knows Janet*, she thought, searching her memory for something in the file she had been furnished that might give a clue to his identity. She was sure his photograph hadn't been there, because she wouldn't have forgotten that handsome face. She could recall no one of his description in the file, either. Of course, eleven years ago, when Janet left Samarra, he could only have been about thirteen or fourteen. Probably he had been one of the vineyard workers' children, she thought, and remembered her because she had been the princess in the big castle. But the princess wouldn't necessarily remember all the peasants.

When he continued to regard her strangely, she asked, "What's the matter?"

"I thought maybe you'd remember," he said a trifle wryly.

"Remember?" she said cautiously.

"You know. When you were supposed to be asleep, and you'd climb out the window, and down the tree, and come down the hill to see me."

My God! she thought. *The precocious Janet had a secret boyfriend at the age of ten.* Charlie wasn't infallible after all, because he had completely missed that. Then she forgave him, because it wasn't the sort of thing there would be any record of. It was Janet LeMaire's fault for not telling him such an important item during their transatlantic phone conversation.

Groping, hoping for a clue, she said, "Of course! Then you must be—"

When she let it hang, he obligingly helped her by saying, "Aram Kellegian."

"Aram!" she said, taking his hand and squeezing it. "Aram Kellegian!"

"It's been a long time," he said with a grin, squeezing back.

Discreetly she withdrew her hand. "It certainly has."

"You remember that night? Halloween?"

"Halloween?" she asked, completely at sea.

"The blood oath."

"Oh, the blood oath. Of course. Halloween."

Emitting a little laugh, he said, "I never told anyone about that. Did you?"

"Of course not," she said virtuously. "We promised, didn't we?"

"We did," he agreed.

She giggled. In a conspiratorial voice she said, "And no one ever knew."

"Not a soul," he confirmed solemnly.

"Oh, Aram," she said with feigned impulsiveness. "Weren't those fun days?"

"They sure were."

"Well, I'd better be getting back," she said, anxious to get away before she made some slip that would expose her as a fraud. "They're probably worrying about me." She smiled. "Hope we run into each other again, but less violently."

She climbed onto the motorcycle. He looked vaguely surprised and mildly disappointed that she was ter-

minating the visit so quickly He watched thoughtfully as she kicked the motor alive.

As she raised the kickstand with her heel, he said, "Oh, Janet . . ."

Turning, she gave him an inquiring look.

"Remember the time in the barn down by the river? You fell out of the hayloft and I caught you, and broke my collarbone."

Nodding and smiling, Kelly said, "I felt so awful about that."

He shrugged. "It's all healed now."

Smiling again, she said, "Well, good-bye, Aram."

Shifting into gear, she gave it the gas and roared off. Mike raced after her until Aram emitted a whistle; then the shepherd turned and trotted back.

"Like her, huh?" Aram said, stooping to rub the dog's head.

Mike wagged his tail.

Straightening and starting back toward the pickup truck, Aram said, "Well, don't let that pretty face fool you. She's a phony. There was never a barn down by the river."

When Kelly got back to the mansion, she found Beau Creel alone in the front room, reading a newspaper. He started to rise to his feet, but she motioned him to remain seated.

"Where's everybody?" she asked.

"Henry went home. Rachel's in the kitchen."

She went back out into the entry hall and along the hallway next to the stairs into the kitchen. She found Rachel breading some pork chops for dinner. Kelly was surprised on two counts. She hadn't realized it was that late, and according to the file Woodville had given her, there were four servants at the mansion, including a cook.

Glancing at her watch, she saw it was five P.M., which took care of the first count. As for the servants, she suddenly realized she hadn't seen any.

"Do you do all your own cooking?" she asked Rachel.

"Only sometimes. When the cook is off."

"Oh. Do you do your own housework?"

Rachel glanced at her. "Of course not. We have a housekeeper and a maid."

"I haven't seen them around."

"They're off, too," Rachel said. "Dinner will be at six. If you want a before-dinner cocktail, Beau will fix you one."

"Thanks," Kelly said. "But my drinking is confined to my warm milk at bedtime."

It really wasn't, but on this job she thought it advisable to keep a completely clear head.

She went on upstairs, closed the door to her room, and got the little CB radio from the inside pocket of her jacket. Sitting on the bed, she extended the antenna, switched it on, and said into it, "Woodville? Come in, Woodville."

"Yes, Kelly?" Scott Woodville's voice came from the radio.

"They've sent the servants off, Woodville. There's no one in the house but Rachel and Beau Creel."

There was a momentary silence, then Woodville said, "I don't like that. Think they plan to try anything?"

"Well, Rachel's cooking dinner. It's going to be breaded pork chops."

There was another silence. Finally the voice from the speaker said, "A poisoned pork chop seems unlikely. Too much chance of someone unexpectedly dropping in just as you keeled over. My guess is they'll wait until you're asleep."

"Mine too," she said.

"I should be there early enough to foil that. I plan to drop by about nine."

"Then I'll go to bed about eight, to give them a chance to make their move."

"Be careful," he warned. "I don't want to find you strangled in bed."

"I think they're more subtle than that," Kelly said. "I'll take care. Incidentally, Woodville, there's some-

thing that wasn't in the file that Sabrina ought to know before she takes over this role."

"What?"

"Janet had a childhood boy friend named Aram Kellegian. Tall, handsome, dark fellow about twenty-three or twenty-four. He must work for the vineyards, because he drives a pickup truck around the place. Janet used to sneak out of the house at night by climbing down a tree, and meet him. One Halloween night they made a blood oath of some kind. Another time she fell out of a hayloft in the barn down by the river; he caught her and broke his collarbone."

"Got it," Woodville said. "How do you spell that name?"

"I don't know," Kelly said. "But it's pronounced *Aram Kellegian*."

"Okay," Woodville said. "One last thing. Make sure your host and hostess catch the seven o'clock news on TV tonight. Or at least make sure Beau Creel sees it."

"All right. Anything in particular I'm to watch for?"

"You'll recognize it when you see it. But don't miss it. It's important."

"I won't miss it."

"Good girl," Woodville said. "Take care."

"I will," Kelly assured him.

Switching off the radio, she retracted the antenna and put the radio back into her jacket in the closet.

Seven

Dinner was slightly strained, but Kelly pretended not to notice. She kept up a cheerful chatter despite the glum silence of the other two. Rachel proved to be a surprisingly good cook. The meal was delicious.

Kelly offered to help with the dishes, but Rachel said her help was unnecessary because there was a dishwasher. She shooed Kelly and Creel into the front room while she cleared the table.

By then it was nearing seven. Kelly said, "I always like to catch the early evening news. Do you know when it comes on, Beau?"

"At seven on channel two." He went over to switch on the set and turn it to the proper channel.

When the news came on, the events happening around the world were following the same pattern they had been for some years. War again threatened in the Middle East, another plane had been hijacked by terrorists, and the Irish Republican Army had blown up another pub in Belfast. The secretary of the treasury announced that the inflation rate was declining. Kelly's attention was beginning to wander when the commentator got to an item that brought her back to earth. He said:

An informed source reports that top executives of an Iranian oil company are secretly in this country to negotiate the development of a major new oil field in the United States. In the past it has been largely United States oil companies that have developed fields in the Arab nations.

According to a highly placed official of the State Department, this will be the first time Arab interests have made a financial investment in American oil fields. Our source refused to name the Iranian oil company or the executives involved, but indicated that many millions of dollars were involved.

That had to be the item they were waiting for, Kelly realized. And it must have been planted by Charlie. For the hundredth time she felt admiration for how widely the tentacles of Charlie's influence spread.

To make sure Beau Creel was paying attention, she said in a tone of indignation, "Those Arabs are trying to buy up the whole world."

"They may succeed," Creel said. "They've got about half the money in the world now."

Rachel came into the room just as the news program was ending. Creel switched to a situation comedy on another channel, and they all sat watching it in silence.

It was only a half-hour program. When it ended at eight o'clock, Kelly yawned and said, "Think I'll go to bed. Hate to leave such sparkling company, but it's been a long day and I'm ready to fall on my face."

"Go right ahead, dear," Rachel said. "We understand."

Rising to her feet, Kelly asked, "Do you have any milk?"

"Oh, yes, your warm milk," Rachel said. "I'll bring it up to you."

"I hate to trouble you."

"No trouble," Rachel assured her. "It will be easier than showing you where the milk is and explaining how to use the electric stove."

"All right, then. Good night."

They both told her good night and watched her leave the room. Neither said anything as they listened to her footsteps ascending the stairs. Presently

Creel got up and went over to the archway to glance up the stairs and make sure Kelly was out of sight. Then he motioned to Rachel and preceded her past the stairs and along the hallway to the kitchen.

"Okay, warm her milk," he said.

Rachel got a bottle of milk from the refrigerator, poured a glass, then dumped the glass into a pan. Setting the pan on one of the burners of the electric stove, she turned it on and put away the milk bottle. Both stood watching the pan, Rachel periodically testing the milk's temperature with a finger. Just before it boiled, she switched off the burner and poured the milk back in the glass. Getting a small silver tray from a cabinet, she set the glass and a paper napkin on it.

Creel took a small packet out of his shirt pocket, unfolded it to reveal a white powder, and dumped the powder into the milk. Taking out a cigarette lighter, he set flame to the empty paper and held it until it nearly burned his fingers. At the last moment he tossed it into the sink garbage disposal. Then he got a spoon from a drawer, thoroughly stirred the milk, washed the spoon at the sink, dried it, and put it away again.

"Better get that upstairs before it cools off," he said.

Staring at the milk in fascination, Rachel said in a low voice, "Beau, do we have to?"

He gave her an irritated look. "I don't intend to turn this place over to her. Do you want to end up out in the street, with a lousy fifty thousand dollars?"

Taking a deep breath, she picked up the tray and started for the door.

"Rachel!" he said commandingly.

Startled, she paused and turned.

"Haven't you forgotten something?" he asked sardonically.

"Forgotten something?"

"Nutmeg!"

Abashedly she returned to set the tray on a

counter. Taking a jar of nutmeg from the spice rack, she sprinkled it on the milk.

"That's better," Creel said. "What kind of a drink is warm milk without nutmeg?"

Rachel picked up the tray again and left the room with it.

After watching her go, Creel went outside by the back door. Crossing over to the garage behind the house, he climbed an outside stairway to the apartment above the garage and knocked on the door. The freckled-faced Rick Wilder answered. Behind him Creel could see Abel Hicks lying on a sofa, reading a magazine.

"I want the pickup at the back door in about forty-five minutes," Creel said. "Loaded with some equipment."

"What equipment?" Wilder asked.

"Same equipment we used on the old man seven years ago. I figure he's lonesome for his daughter."

The freckled man smiled like a shark. "So we're arranging a reunion?"

"Uh-huh."

"We'll be ready," Wilder said.

Creel went back down the stairs, reentered the house by the back door, and returned to the living room. The television set was still on, and another sitcom was playing. He settled down to enjoy it.

Upstairs Kelly was in bed, wearing a shorty nightgown and reading a magazine. There was a knock on the bedroom door.

"Come in," she called.

Rachel entered carrying the silver tray. Setting it on the bedside stand, she said, "I brought your milk. I hope it's warm enough."

"How kind of you," Kelly said.

Rachel gave her a strained smile. "Why? Did you think I'd forgotten?"

Smiling also, Kelly said, "No, I didn't."

Rachel stood there, looking down at her, obviously waiting for her to drink the milk. Kelly picked up the glass, touched it to her lips, then set it down again.

"Little hot," she said. "I'll have to let it cool."

She glanced back at her magazine. Rachel, at a loss, stood there for another moment, then decided there was no way she could with grace stay long enough to watch the milk consumed.

"Well, pleasant dreams," she said, and turned toward the door.

Glancing up from her magazine, Kelly said, "Good night, Rachel. And thank you for everything."

"You're welcome," Rachel said, then pulled the door closed behind her from outside.

Downstairs Rachel found Creel watching TV in the living room. He gave her an inquiring look, and she nodded. He glanced at his watch.

"Supposed to be fast-acting stuff, but we won't push it," he said. "We'll check her about nine."

They sat watching television.

At a quarter to nine Creel looked at his watch again, then got to his feet. Rachel gave him an apprehensive look.

"Not yet," he told her. "I'm just going to check something out."

He went through the kitchen and out the back door. Just as Creel emerged from the back door, Rick Wilder backed a pickup truck up to the rear porch steps. By now it had turned dark, but Wilder didn't have any lights on.

Standing on the porch, Creel looked into the bed of the truck. A canvas tarp was spread over something bulky there. Wilder got out of the truck cab and came around back to look up at Creel.

"You get it all?" the blond man asked.

The freckled man nodded. "Block of cement, canvas tarp, and some nylon rope."

"What about her motorcycle?"

"It's in the garage. I'll take it down and dump it later."

Creel descended the porch steps and walked back away from the house a few yards. He looked up at the window of the room Kelly had.

The window drapes were open and the room was

lighted. Creel started to frown, but then he saw the girl, wearing a shorty nightgown, come over to draw the drapes. She was swaying on her feet groggily. As the drapes closed, his frown changed to a smile of satisfaction.

"Wait here," Creel said to Wilder. "Won't be long."

He reentered the back door.

Eight

Halting in the living room archway, Creel said to Rachel, "It's time."

Rachel paled, but she quietly got to her feet and came over to him. After examining her critically, he bent his head and sniffed.

"I haven't been drinking!" she flared at him.

"Just checking," he said soothingly. "Come on."

He went up the stairway first, with Rachel following behind him reluctantly. At Kelly's bedroom he held his ear against the door for a few moments, then eased it open. After peering in, he pushed it all the way open.

By the light from the hallway they could see the girl lying on her back, covered to her chin, her eyes closed. The glass on the silver tray alongside the bed was empty. Creel crossed over to the bed, but Rachel halted in the doorway.

Creel lightly touched the girl's forehead. When there was no reaction, he flicked the tip of her nose with a forefinger. There was still no reaction. Taking hold of the covers, he flipped them over the foot of the bed to expose the girl in a semitransparent shorty nightgown.

Glancing around at Rachel in the doorway, he said sardonically, "Little bitty nightgown like that, she could catch her death in the swamp." After a beat he added, "Just like her daddy did."

Rachel controlled a shiver at the man's black humor. Creel bent to slide an arm behind the girl's shoulders and aother beneath her knees. Then he jerked erect again when the door chimes sounded from below. Rachel gave him a frightened look.

"Well, go answer it!" he snapped at her. "Whoever it is, get rid of them."

Turning, Rachel hurried across the hall and down the stairs. Creel drew the covers back over Kelly, clear to her chin, then went out into the hall and pulled the door closed behind him.

Sitting up, Kelly murmured to herself, "You timed that too close for comfort, Woodville."

She threw back the covers, slipped from bed, and went over to open the window drapes. By moonlight she stripped off her nightgown and quickly dressed in her jeans, cowboy boots, and leather jacket. From one of her saddlebags she took a coil of nylon rope, tied one end to the radiator beneath the window, and tossed the other end out the window.

Sticking her head out the window, she peered both ways. Off to her left she saw a pickup truck backed up to the rear porch steps, and a man seated on the steps smoking a cigarette. He was nearly half the breadth of the building away from her, though, which made it unlikely he could hear her descent. He would be able to spot her if he happened to glance that way, of course, but that was a chance she had to take.

Seating herself on the windowsill with her legs outside, she grasped the rope and slid from the window. She kept her gaze on the seated man as she let herself down hand over hand. His head started to turn her way just as she reached the ground, and she dropped flat. There was no cover, but she pressed herself against the edge of the building. The man looked beyond her without spotting her. When his

gaze shifted in the opposite direction, she quickly jumped to her feet and ducked around the corner of the building.

Inside, Beau Creel was standing at the top of the stairs, in shadow because he had switched off the upper hall light, watching the front door. Rachel had opened it to disclose a tall, rather distinguished-looking man with a fringe of curling hair ringing his bald pate. He was wearing a conservative business suit and carried an attacé case.

"Mrs. LeMaire?" the man asked.

"Yes."

"My name is Scott Woodville. May I speak to you for a moment?"

"It's very late," Rachel said nervously. "Could you come back in the morning?"

"It won't take long. I understand there is a young woman in this house who claims to be Janet LeMaire."

The word *claims* hit Beau Creel like a bombshell. From the way her back stiffened, he could tell it hit Rachel that way, too.

The bald man said, "A gasoline attendant in town told me she refueled her motorcycle this morning and asked for directions to the Samarra Vineyards."

Creel hurried down the stairs. Halfway down he called, "Let him in."

Rachel stepped aside to let the man enter, then closed the door behind him. The man looked at Creel inquiringly as the vineyard manager approached.

Halting before the man, Creel said, "My name's Beau Creel. I run the place for Mrs. LeMaire."

"Scott Woodville," the bald man said, handing him a business card.

Studying the card, Creel said, "Attorney-at-law. Office in Los Angeles." He looked up. "About this girl, you're saying she's an imposter?"

"Of the first order," Woodville said.

"Who is she?" Rachel said.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not authorized to discuss the

details of the case," Woodville said regretfully. He glanced around. "Where is she?"

"She's not here," Creel said carefully.

Woodville frowned. "Not here? I don't understand."

Creel shrugged. "She said she was going into town."

"Oh. Any idea where?"

Rachel said, "To visit some childhood friends, she said. But that couldn't be if she's an imposter. She wouldn't know Janet's friends." She gave Creel an expectant look, as though awaiting applause for her cleverness.

Ignoring her, Creel said, "She told us she wouldn't be back till late."

Woodville said, "Well, I suggest that when she does get back, we have the sheriff waiting for her."

"We will," Creel assured him.

Woodville glanced at his watch.

"No need for you to wait around, Mr. Woodville," Creel said. "I'll call Sheriff Hopkins."

"I do have some arrangements to make tonight," Woodville said. "I have an early morning appointment."

"Don't worry about a thing," Creel said. "We'll take care of your imposter for you."

"Very well." The bald man emitted a sigh of relief. "I'm glad it'll be taken care of tonight. It could be embarrassing if those two women were to meet."

"Two women?" Rachel said inquiringly.

"Why, yes. The imposter and the *real* Janet LeMaire."

Creel and Rachel stared at him in consternation. "The real Janet LeMaire?" the blond man repeated stupidly.

"Yes. There's good news." Woodville beamed at them. "Miss LeMaire will be flying in tomorrow at ten. There's no need to make any fuss, though. She'll be staying at the hotel."

"The hotel?" Rachel said.

"Why?" Creel asked.

"I'm sure Miss LeMaire would rather explain that herself," the bald man said primly. "Good night."

He gave them another smile, opened the door, went out, and pulled it closed behind him.

Creel and Rachel looked at each other. Creel drew a long breath and expelled it. He glanced toward the stairway.

"Looks like we wasted a glass of milk," he said in a tone of regret.

"What are we going to tell the sheriff?" Rachel asked with a touch of panic. "We'll have to call him."

"After we dispose of the evidence," Creel agreed. "We'll just tell him she never came back. She lost her nerve and took off." He started toward the stairs, then paused and turned. "Wilder's out back in a pickup. Go tell him to bring the tarp and the rope."

"Do I have to be involved?" she asked in a tone of distaste.

"You're involved up to your pretty neck," he rasped. "Do what I tell you."

He continued on, and up the stairs. After staring at his back for a moment, Rachel gave a little shudder, then headed for the kitchen.

Upstairs Creel switched the hall light back on, crossed the hall, and opened the door to Kelly's bedroom. He came to a dead stop when by the light from the hallway he saw the covers thrown back and the flimsy nightgown tossed in the middle of the bed. Quickly he flicked on the room light, strode across to the open bathroom door, and flicked on that light, too. Sliding open the shower door, he glanced in, then strode back into the bedroom.

The open window caught his eye; then he saw the rope tied to the radiator leading out the window. He leaned out to look down, but saw no sign of the girl. Glancing left with the intention of calling out to Rick Wilder, he was just in time to see the back door closing. Turning, he ran from the room and downstairs.

Rachel and the freckled man were just coming into the entry hall from the direction of the kitchen.

Wilder was carrying a rolled-up piece of tarp and had a loop of nylon rope around his shoulder.

"She's gone!" Creel half yelled. "She must have been on to us all the time." He glared at Wilder. "She climbed down a rope from her window right in front of your nose!"

"I didn't see her," Wilder said defensively.

"Drop that stuff and come on," Creel said. "She can't be far away."

The freckled man dropped the tarp and the rope on the floor of the entry hall and hurried toward the front door after Creel.

Rachel called, "Beau!"

Halting with the front door open, Creel turned to look at her.

"We don't have to kill her now, do we?" Rachel said. "Can't we just turn her over to the sheriff?"

"We have to catch her first," Creel snarled.

"And, Beau, what about the real Janet LeMaire?"

"We'll take care of her when the time comes," he said, and continued on out.

Rick Wilder followed. At the bottom of the flight of stone steps both halted and looked around in all directions.

"You take that way," Creel said, gesturing to the right. "I'll go the other way."

They moved off in opposite directions. As Creel rounded the corner of the house and the garage came into view, he had a sudden thought. Running to the garage, he slid up the overhead door and turned on the light. It was a triple garage. The Mercedes convertible was in one stall, a station wagon in another, and the motorcycle in the third.

Creel got a wrench from a tool kit, then unscrewed a spark plug from the motorcycle and dropped it into his pocket. He returned the wrench, flicked off the light, and closed the garage door again.

Rick Wilder appeared from the shadows. "No sign of her on that side," he said.

Creel glanced around with pursed lips. "Rick, if you decided to split from a situation like this chick

was in, and you had a motorcycle available, where would you head?"

Wilder gave him a peculiar look. "For the motorcycle first, I guess."

Creel nodded. "Right. She had plenty of time to get to it, because we were tied up with a guy who came to the door, and you were outback, contemplating your navel or something."

"I was awake," Wilder protested. "You never said to be on the lookout for her making a break."

Creel made a dismissing gesture. "Point is, she didn't take advantage of all that opportunity to get to her bike. Which means she wasn't all that anxious to get away. Now, why?"

At that moment a shrill feminine scream sounded from the house.

Nine

When Creel and Wilder rushed outside, Rachel immediately headed for the little service bar in the front room. She was pouring a glass of wine from a crystal decanter when from the edge of her vision she saw one side of the French windows at the far end of the room slowly begin to open. She glanced that way just as the fake Janet LeMaire stepped inside the room from outdoors, dressed in the same outfit in which she had arrived.

The sudden appearance so unnerved Rachel that she dropped the decanter and screamed. The decanter smashed, splashing her ankles with wine.

The girl in the black leather jacket swaggered over to seat herself on a corner of the Louis XIV table with the lion's paw legs, letting one boot-clad foot

dangle. A subtle change had taken place in her. Suddenly she looked tough and brittle and street-wise.

Grinning at Rachel, she said, "Little nervous, aren't you, sister?"

Beau Creel came bursting through the open French window with Rick Wilder right behind him. Both men came to abrupt halts to stare at Kelly.

After a lengthy pause, Creel said softly, "You've got some nerve, coming back here."

"Amateurs," Kelly said contemptuously. "You didn't think I'd fall for that warm milk bit?"

Creel moved over closer to stare down into her face. He too had caught the subtle change in the girl, her new hardness, and it made him wary.

He said, "Lawyer named Woodville just showed up."

Rachel put in, "He told us the *real* Janet LeMaire was coming here tomorrow."

"If that's supposed to throw me for a loss, try again," Kelly said. "I opened my bedroom door a crack and heard everything he said. So little Miss Janet got away, I guess."

Beau Creel's lips curled in an unbelieving smile. "Nice try, honey. You sure come prepared. All I got to do is call the sheriff, and he'll put you away for a while."

Unfazed, Kelly said, "That'll give me time to tell him about the kind of milkshakes you serve around here."

Creel's smile faded. "Why *did* you come back?" "To see what I could salvage. Okay, she got away. But no one knows what I look like. It'll still work."

"What are you after?"

"Half of whatever there is."

"Half of the vineyards?" Rachel asked indignantly. Kelly glanced at her. "Grapes? Who's talking about grapes?"

"What else is there?" Creel asked.

"That's what I came here to find out. You two sure blew that."

"Find out what?" Creel asked patiently.

Kelly emitted a contemptuous little laugh. "Tell you all, huh? I used to work a mind-reading act, but I don't need a blindfold to tell what you two are thinking. You get me to tell you what I know, then you dump me somewhere. Don't try it. Anything happens to me, I got friends out there who could make the Marquis de Sade look like a Boy Scout."

"Keep talking," Creel said.

Kelly glanced at Rick Wilder, who still stood silently taking everything in. "You want the hired help to know all your business?"

Turning toward the freckled man, Creel said, "Go get that tarp and rope out of the entry hall, Rick. Put everything back where you got it."

Wilder looked at Kelly with dislike, then silently marched from the room. Creel watched through the archway as he picked up the dropped tarp and rope and headed for the kitchen. Then his gaze touched the smashed wine decanter on the floor, and he looked at Rachel with flared nostrils.

"Ran for the bottle soon as I was out of the house, didn't you?"

"I didn't have a drop, Beau," she said quickly.

"Only because you dropped the damned bottle," he blazed at her. "Clean it up."

Giving him a hurt look, she left the room and turned toward the kitchen. Creel turned back to Kelly.

"Just who the hell are you?" he asked.

"My name's Kelly Garrett. I guess you could call me a soldier of fortune. The only thing fake on that passport I figure you grabbed a look at was the name. I been all the places listed, and I've done most everything. I've worked carnivals, burlesque, dealt blackjack, worked the badger game, and pulled a hundred cons. Did a little time here and there, but nothing heavy. You want more?"

"I guess that about covers it," Creel said.

Rachel came back into the room with a broom and

dustpan. Both watched as she swept up the broken glass. She carried it off to the kitchen.

"Get on with your story," Creel said.

"Let's wait for Rachel," Kelly suggested. "I don't like to chew my cabbage twice."

He looked at her curiously. "That's a hell of an expression."

"My grandmother used to say it."

Rachel came back into the room with some paper toweling and began to sop up the spilled wine.

"Okay," Creel said to Kelly. "Let's hear it."

"We got onto this deal from a feature article in the *L.A. Times* about two weeks ago," Kelly said. "It was all written up about how Vincent LeMaire was going to be declared legally dead this coming Saturday, and how under the terms of his will everything would go to his daughter, Janet, if she showed up before the declaration. Only nobody knew where she was. You know about that story?"

"We knew about it," Creel affirmed in a grim tone.

"My old man knew Janet LeMaire. She—"

"Your old man?" Rachel interrupted, looking up from her dabbing.

Kelly looked at her. "Guy I live with."

"Oh."

"As I said, my old man knew her. She wasn't lost, like the feature article said. She was well-known in the international jet set. She's already loaded without this place, you know."

Rachel dropped the paper toweling into a wastebasket alongside the service bar. "No, we didn't," she said. "We hadn't had news of her in years."

"Her mother's relatives kept dropping off," Kelly informed them. "Each one left her a bundle. My old man used to be a sort of hanger-on in the jet set. A tennis bum. You've heard of tennis bums?"

Creel and Rachel both nodded. Rachel said with mild distaste, "Sort of freeloaders on the rich."

"They pay their way," Kelly said, bristling slightly. "You can't imagine the crap they have to put up with

for their room and board. Always on exhibition, always giving free tennis lessons to spoiled brats who could afford to buy their own racquet clubs if they wanted to. Always having to be witty, like some damned court jester. It's no easy life."

"Okay," Creel said sardonically. "We'll concede your old man is a misunderstood hero. Get on with it."

After gazing at him sullenly for a moment, Kelly said, "Buz—that's my old man—knew Janet well. He made a collect cable call to her place on the French Riviera to tell her about the feature article. She thanked him, said she'd fly into L.A. in a few days, and asked him to meet her at the airport. After he hung up, we got to talking about it, and I suddenly had this brainstorm. Nobody up at Samarra knew what this chick looked like, I told Buz. What if we grabbed her off, picked her brain for enough background to pass me off as Janet LeMaire, and had *me* claim the inheritance?"

Creel and Rachel regarded Kelly with fascination. There was also a touch of indignation in the woman's gaze, but instead of indignation, Creel's expression showed grudging admiration.

Kelly grinned. "Buz came around right away, because he's got no more morals than I have. But we are staying in an apartment house full of a lot of friendly tenants who were always running in and out of our place, so we couldn't use it. We paired up with another couple I'd pulled some con games with in the past, who had a secluded beach house at Port Hueneme, about fifty miles north of Los Angeles. Buz picked Janet up at the airport and brought her there. She didn't know where he lived, of course, and just assumed he was taking her home."

"How did you get her to fill you in on her background?" Creel asked.

"We gave her a shot, a truth drug. I asked the questions, and she filled me in on everything from the time she was a kid. Then, bang, she started mumbling about something that changed our whole

idea. Originally this place was all we were after. After inheriting, I was going to sell off everything, then we'd divvy up the proceeds. But that turned out to be small potatoes."

"What did she say that changed your minds?" Rachel asked.

"It seems she told all her friends about Buz's cable call. And word travels fast in the jet set. Just before she left the Riviera, she got a phone call from a Paris lawyer. He told her Samarra was worth far more than its apparent value, and that representatives of an international cartel were interested in talking to her. Those representatives would shortly be in the United States, and would contact her at Samarra. The lawyer asked her to contact a Los Angeles attorney named Scott Woodville when she got to L.A., who would fill her in on the details."

"What were the details?" Creel asked.

Kelly shrugged. "She hadn't had time to contact Woodville. But one thing the Paris lawyer told her came out, and that was what changed our minds. He told her under no circumstances to dispose of the property until she heard from the representatives of the international cartel, because they were prepared to make her a substantial offer."

"Like what?" Creel asked.

"Twenty million," Kelly said casually.

Rachel and Creel gazed at her openmouthed. "*Here?*" Rachel finally said in a high voice. "*For this place?*"

"You gave her a needle," Creel scoffed. "She was dreaming."

Kelly said positively, "You give someone a truth drug, they tell you the truth."

There was a long period of silence. Eventually Creel said, "What could be on this place worth twenty million?"

"That's what I came here to find out," Kelly told him. "That's what the three of us are still going to find out, if you want to be partners."

"How?" Rachel asked.

"First off, no more milkshakes."

"No more milkshakes," Creel agreed.

Kelly became brisk and businesslike. "We split fifty-fifty. Half for you two, half for me."

"There's three of us," Creel said. "We'll split three ways."

"There's four on my team," Kelly told him. "If you want to be that way, we'll split six ways."

"Okay, fifty-fifty," Creel agreed.

"So who needs more than ten million?" Kelly inquired. "There's plenty for everybody."

"I still want to know how we're going to get our hands on it," Rachel said.

"First we have to find out what's so valuable around here," Kelly said. "We keep an eye on Janet. She's bright, but she doesn't know we know. She'll make a slip, and that's all we need. Just one slip, then we make our move. Deal?"

Creel and Rachel exchanged glances. Kelly could tell by their expressions that their suspicion of her had been mastered by their greed.

Ten

The pair looked back at Kelly again. "Deal." Creel said.

"Okay," Kelly said briskly. "Before we make detailed plans, I better check on my old man. Mind me making a long-distance call on your phone?"

"To Port Hueneme?" Rachel asked.

"To our Los Angeles apartment. If Janet escaped, they would have split from the beach house because they would expect the fuzz to drop in to ask why

the hell they had been holding the woman against her will."

"Go ahead," Creel said. "There's a phone on the bar in the game room."

Kelly crossed the entry hall to the game room. Glancing back as she reached the bar, she saw Creel come from the living room and head for the kitchen. Inwardly smiling, she picked up the phone, punched 1, area code 213, then a phone number. As the phone in Los Angeles started to ring, she heard the click of the kitchen extension being lifted.

A husky voice she would not have recognized as John Bosley's if she hadn't expected him to answer said, "Yeah?"

"Kelly, Buz," she said. "What happened?"

"You know about it?" Bosley asked cautiously.

"I assumed she had gotten away when I heard she was coming to Samarra tomorrow. Who goofed?"

"Myra left the idiot door unlocked after taking her breakfast, then came down to the beach to join me and Gus. She just walked out."

"Gus knows how flaky Myra is," Kelly said indignantly. "He shouldn't have trusted her to do *anything*. Where are Gus and Myra?"

"Here with me. The beach house was only rented, so they just packed up and lammed. I don't think Janet reported it to the police, though."

"Why not?"

"Do you mean why didn't she report it, or why do I think she didn't?"

"Both."

"I suppose she skipped reporting it for old times' sake. She always liked me, and I guess she didn't want to see me do thirty years for kidnapping. I doubt that I'll get any more invitations to her place on the Riviera, though."

"What makes you so sure she didn't report it?"

"Nothing on the news."

After pretending to think this over, Kelly said, "Yeah, I guess a reported kidnapping would be bound to make the news."

"When will you be home?" Bosley asked.

"Not for a while. The deal isn't dead yet, lover. Her lawyer came up here and blew the whistle on me, but I've gone into partnership with Mrs. LeMaire and Beau Creel. Whatever we get out of it, we split fifty for them and fifty for us."

"There's four of us," Bosley protested in his disguised voice.

"That comes to five million for us and five for Gus and Myra," Kelly informed him. "Don't knock it. Without Rachel and Creel's cooperation, we'll be out in the cold completely."

"All right," Bosley agreed with reluctance. "I guess we have no choice. Hang in there, baby."

"I will," Kelly said. She made a little kissing noise.

"Same to you, honey," Bosley said.

He hung up. Kelly listened for the click of the kitchen extension before hanging up also. She smiled to herself when it came. If Beau Creel had nourished any lingering suspicion of her, that phone conversation should have killed it, she thought. She hadn't realized Bosley was such an accomplished actor.

Creel was coming from the direction of the kitchen when Kelly crossed the entry hall on the way back from the living room.

"Get him?" he asked innocently.

"Uh-huh."

They reentered the living room together. Rachel was closing the French door Kelly had left open. The woman glanced around, then came back to seat herself on the sofa. Kelly took an easy chair. Creel remained standing.

Creel asked Kelly, "What did he say?"

The blond man had listened to every word Bosley had said, but if he wanted to play innocent, it was all right with Kelly. She said, "The dumb broad they had feeding Janet forgot to lock her in after serving her breakfast, then left the house. She just walked out. They all lammed from the beach house when

they found her gone, but Buz doesn't think she reported to the police that she'd been snatched."

"Why wouldn't she?" Rachel asked.

"She always liked Buz, and I guess she wasn't mad enough to make him take a long rap." She shrugged. "Maybe she's got a crush on him. He's built like a Greek god." Thinking of Bosley, she inwardly added, Bacchus.

Bored with the conversation, since it was repetition of what he had already heard, Creel said, "How do we keep an eye on the real Janet?"

Kelly said, "Well now, I just happen to have some pretty sophisticated electronic equipment in my backpack. Meant to use it on you two, but it'll come in just as handy for spying on Janet. That Woodville fellow didn't mention which hotel Janet is staying at, did he?"

"There's only one," Creel said. "Only one called a hotel, anyway. There's some motels, but I remember her lawyer said she would be staying at the 'hotel.' That would be the Central Plaza."

"Why don't you phone the Plaza and check if she has a reservation there?" Rachel suggested.

"Good idea," Creel said.

He crossed the hall to the game room. In a few minutes he returned to say, "She has a reservation for tomorrow morning. So what's that get us?"

Kelly looked speculatively from Creel to Rachel. "Would she be surprised to receive a welcoming basket of flowers from either of you?"

"From me, she would," Creel said. "I was only one of her father's truck drivers when she left here."

"I doubt that she has very fond feelings for me," Rachel said. "Her mother brought her up to hate her father, and I rather imagine the old bag had a few choice words to say about me, too."

"Why do we want to send her flowers?" Creel asked.

"Because a little bug will be planted in the center of them. And it will pick up everything said within twenty-five feet of it."

Slow smiles formed on the faces of Creel and Rachel. The latter suddenly said, "Henry Bancroft."

When Kelly and Creel both looked at her without understanding, she said, "To send the flowers. Janet wouldn't wonder a minute about flowers from him."

Kelly simulated surprise. "Would he do it? Wouldn't you have to cut him in?"

"He's already in," Creel said glumly. "All the way."

Kelly shrugged. "If you want to give away a share of *your* ten million, that's up to you." After a moment she added, "We ought to get a tap on her phone, too."

"How?" Creel asked.

"You're a big wheel around here," Kelly said. "With all your influence, couldn't you find out what room at the hotel they're putting her in? Or suite, more likely."

"I imagine I could. I've served on some community boards with the hotel manager. But then what?"

"Just leave the rest to me."

Creel left the room again. This time when he returned, he said, "Four-o-five, six, and seven. It's a suite."

"I figured it would be," Kelly said. She rose to her feet. "I'll run upstairs to pick up my bugs and a couple of tools, then I'll take a spin into town."

Reaching into his pocket, Creel drew out the spark plug he had removed from her motorcycle and handed it to her. "You'll need this. You'll find a wrench in the tool kit against the east wall of the garage."

Accepting the plug, Kelly cocked an eyebrow at him. "You're not such an amateur after all," she said. "How long have I been grounded?"

"Not long. I swallowed you whole until Woodville showed up."

Half an hour later Kelly parked her motorcycle on the street alongside the Central Plaza Hotel, hung her helmet on the handlebars, and went in by the side entrance. It was not a large hotel, only eight

stories tall, but it was as modern and as richly furnished as any hotel on the Las Vegas Strip. Although the town had a population of less than ten thousand, it was a rich community, and there weren't any second-rate establishments.

In this grape country, dress tended to be informal, and no one paid any attention to her jeans, cowboy boots, and black leather jacket. She took the elevator to the fourth floor.

She located the suite without difficulty, and used a thin wire picklock to get in. It was an elaborate suite with a large living room containing a bar, and twin bedrooms off either side of the living room. All three rooms had phones.

Kelly decided on the one in the central room. Unscrewing the mouthpiece, she inserted an electronic bug, screwed the mouthpiece back on, and was out again within five minutes.

By the time she got back to the mansion, it was eleven P.M. She found Creel and Rachel still in the living room, but now with company. The company was Henry Bancroft.

"Why, hello, Henry," she said with a sardonic grin. "What are you doing here so late?"

"Beau phoned and invited me over. He and Rachel have been telling me some interesting things."

"I imagine."

"I understand your real name is Kelly Garrett, and you've had quite a colorful career."

"Let's not talk about me, Henry," she said with mock humility. "Let's talk about you. For instance, did Beau and Rachel mention about the flowers?"

The lawyer nodded. "Clever idea. I understand you've been downtown to see about bugging the phone in Janet's suite, too. Any luck?"

"It's bugged." Kelly took a small electronic bug from a jacket pocket and handed it to Bancroft. "Stick this somewhere in the center of the flower arrangement. You can fasten it to a stalk by that small clip."

Examining it, the lawyer said, "Compact, isn't it? What's its range?"

"Only about two city blocks. We'll have to find a spot in town within range for the receivers. Maybe the furnace room of some office building. Or is there a motel that close?"

"My office is only a block from the hotel," Bancroft said.

"Perfect," Kelly said. "Suppose we all gather there in the morning?"

"After her plane comes in," Creel said. "I want to watch that land first."

It was midnight before they finished discussing strategy and Henry Bancroft left. When Kelly finally got upstairs, she put her shorty nightgown back on, then sat on the edge of the bed and called Woodville on the CB radio.

When she got him, she said, "They swallowed it, Woodville. The split is fifty percent for me and my mythical friends, fifty percent for Beau, Rachel, and Henry Bancroft."

"Oh, Bancroft's in on it, too, eh?"

"Up to his barrister ears. Everything set for tomorrow morning?"

"Hopefully. I was waiting to hear from you before I phoned Bosley. Incidentally, how did he perform when you called him?"

"Like a veteran. He almost had me convinced he was a tennis bum named Buz."

"I'm glad he's a good actor," Woodville said, "because we have a few more acting chores for him."

Eleven

The county airport didn't have long enough runways to handle large passenger jets, but there was considerable traffic in commuter flights, chartered flights, and private planes. Beau Creel and Rick Wilder got there early and climbed stairs to the VIP Room. This was an upstairs waiting room in the terminal with a glass wall overlooking the field, where people awaiting planes could while away the time having drinks or refreshments. They took a table next to the transparent wall, from where they could see all arriving flights, and ordered coffee.

After a time a chauffeur-driven limousine pulled up alongside the nearest runway, and a man in a neat business suit got out. He stood waiting next to the car.

Tapping Wilder's arm, Creel pointed to the waiting man and said, "That's the lawyer who came by last night."

The freckled man nodded.

Exactly at ten A.M. a Lear jet landed. Touching down in a perfect three-point landing, it taxied over to a parking position opposite the limousine and only about a hundred feet away. Through the cockpit's plexiglass canopy Creel and Wilder could see a woman seated next to the pilot, but from that distance they could make out only that she had dark hair. She waved to Woodville, and the bald man waved back.

"*That's* no motorcycle," Creel said, impressed. "She's got her own private plane."

The plane's doors opened and a descent ladder

clicked down into place. Sabrina Duncan emerged, radiant, beautifully dressed in a light gray travel suit, looking like visiting royalty. Behind Sabrina came Jill Munroe, hardly recognizable because she wore a mannishly tailored suit, wide-rimmed spectacles, and a mouse-brown wig parted in the middle, severely pulled back, and tied in a bun at the base of her neck. Behind Jill came John Bosley, dressed in a blue serge suit and carrying a briefcase.

Woodville went over to meet them. Moving his head slightly in the direction of the terminal building, he said, "Make it look good. You have an audience."

They all went through the ritual of handshakes and smiles. While this was going on, a baggage truck backed up to the plane and an attendant began unloading a large amount of expensive-looking luggage from the plane.

Woodville called to him, "My good man, that goes to Miss LeMaire's suite at the Central Plaza, you understand. There's no room in the limousine for it."

"Yes, sir," the man called back. "I'll get it there."

Woodville escorted the two girls and Bosley in the direction of the limousine. He said to Bosley, "You see, Bosley? Never give up hope. Plans do change."

"Yes, indeed they do," Bosley said happily. Then he glanced up at the taller man quizzically. "But I have a feeling I was included all along, and Charlie was just exercising his strange sense of humor."

"He's a strange man," Woodville admitted.

They reached the limousine and Woodville turned to give Jill a critical examination. She was putting on a good act. She was not only dressed and made up to represent an efficient secretary, but had adopted a stiff, sexless walk and wore the prim expression of a woman committed to lifelong virginity.

"You look terrible," Woodville said to her.

"Thanks," Jill said in a pleased voice. "I worked pretty hard at it."

"How's Kelly?" Sabrina asked.

"Last night they tried to drop her into the swamp, next to her daddy. Today they're thick as thieves."

"They bought it, then?" Jill asked.

"The whole package." Turning back to Sabrina, he said, "One thing, Sabrina. It seems there was some one in Janet LeMaire's life when she was a child whom Charlie missed. A secret boy friend."

"At ten years old?" Sabrina asked.

"Uh-huh. I'll fill you in on the way to the hotel."

He held open the rear door for Sabrina and Jill to get in. Closing the door again, he said to Bosley, "Okay, go into your act."

Opening his briefcase, Bosley took out a file folder. He took a paper from the folder, laid it on the hood of the limousine, and handed Woodville a pen. After briefly scanning the paper, Woodville signed it with a flourish, handed Bosley the paper, and started to put the pen in his inside pocket.

Holding out his hand, Bosley said, "You don't have to act that much like a lawyer."

"Oh, sorry," Woodville said, handing him the pen. "Must be a reflex habit. I have a drawer full of strange pens at home."

Bosley replaced the paper in the file folder, put the file folder back in the briefcase, zipped it closed, and headed for the terminal. Woodville opened the rear door of the limousine again, lifted one of the jump seats, and climbed in to seat himself facing the two girls.

Up in the VIP Room, Beau Creel's gaze followed Bosley's approaching figure. He said to Wilder, "Not in her class, I guess." After a thoughtful pause, he added, "But then, why did she let him ride in her plane, if he isn't good enough to ride in her limousine? I want to know who he is, and what he's up to, Rick."

Nodding and rising from the table, the freckled man hurried toward the stairs leading to the first floor of the terminal. Creel returned his attention to the limousine. It was just driving away. Getting up also,

he dropped a tip on the table and went over to the cashier to pay for the two coffees.

In the limousine Woodville slid closed the glass panel separating the front and rear seats so that the driver couldn't overhear their conversation.

"This childhood boy friend Kelly turned up," the man said to Sabrina. "His name is Aram Kellegian, he drives a pickup truck around the vineyards, he has a big German shepherd named Mike, and he's tall, dark, and handsome. Kelly estimates his age at around twenty-three or twenty-four. Janet used to sneak out of the house at night when she was supposed to be sleeping by climbing down a tree, and go to meet him."

"Interesting," Sabrina said. "Anything in particular I ought to know about him?"

"Couple of things. One Halloween night they made some kind of blood oath that neither has ever revealed to anyone else. And once in a barn down by the river, Janet fell out of a hayloft; Aram caught her and broke his collarbone."

Sabrina nodded. "Got it filed in my memory."

Woodville took a paper from his inside breast pocket and handed it to Jill. "Here's the deed to the swamp. Keep it in a safe place until you need it."

Also nodding, she put it in her purse.

Swarthy Abell Hicks was leaning against a lamp-post in front of the Central Plaza Hotel. When he saw the limousine approaching, he quickly entered the hotel and ducked into one of a bank of phone booths in the lobby directly opposite the desk. Dropping a coin, he dialed a number.

A block away the phone rang in Henry Bancroft's office. The lawyer lifted the receiver from a squawk-box attachment, laid it on the desk, and said, "Yes?"

Abel Hick's voice said from the speaker. "They're just arriving.

"You take care of the flowers?" Bancroft asked.

"Yes, sir, they're taken care of."

Kelly, today wearing her tan slacks, another silk

blouse, and loafers, was adjusting a radio receiver on the windowsill to the right of the desk. Turning, she formed her thumb and forefinger into an O in indication that the receiver was working properly.

The office door opened and Beau Creel came in. "They ought to be checking in any minute now," he said. "They left the airport a jump ahead of me."

Pointing to the phone off its hook, Bancroft said, "They just pulled in."

At the hotel the prim, middle-aged desk clerk on duty watched the two women and the tall, balding man approach the desk.

"May I help you?" he asked when they got there.

"I'm Janet LeMaire" Sabrina said.

"Oh, yes, Miss LeMaire. We have your reservation." He gave her a beaming smile. "And may I say, welcome home?"

"Thank you," Sabrina said.

The clerk laid a registration form on the desk before her. Moving forward, Jill pulled the card over before her and rapidly filled it out. After briefly scanning it, the desk clerk set it aside.

Peering toward the front door, he asked, "Did you leave your luggage with the doorman?"

"It's coming from the airport in a truck," Jill said. "When it arrives, please have it sent up."

"Of course."

The clerk snapped his fingers and a bellhop came over. The desk clerk handed him two keys.

"It is the fourth floor, isn't it?" Jill said.

"Oh, absolutely." To the bellhop he said, "Suite four-o-six."

"Suite four-o-six?" Sabrina said. "I'm afraid there's been some mistake. My secretary—" Indicating Jill, she let it trail off.

Upset at her efficiency being in doubt, Jill turned to Woodville. "Mr. Woodville, when I phoned you, I'm sure I told you Miss LeMaire wanted the *fourth floor*."

Frowning at the clerk, Woodville asked, "Isn't that what I requested?"

"Yes, sir." In a patient tone he said to Sabrina, "I assure you, Miss LeMaire, four-o-six is on the fourth floor."

"You don't seem to understand," Sabrina said with a touch of impatience. "I meant the *fourth floor*."

The clerk gazed at her flabbergasted, finally understanding. "The *entire* floor?"

Sabrina indicated Jill. "There are two of us."

Completely rattled, the clerk said, "But there are people on the fourth floor."

Imperiously Sabrina said, "Of course, if it can't be arranged— Mr. Woodville, are there any other suitable establishments in town?"

"No, no, no," the clerk said hastily. "It will just take a few minutes to move them. And meantime you won't have to wait, because your suite is already vacant, you see. Your basic suite, that is, which just happens to be centrally located on the floor."

Giving him a radiant smile, Sabrina said, "You're very kind."

Woodville said to Sabrina, "I have an important call to make, Miss LeMaire. Don't forget that they're expecting you at Samarra."

Sabrina nodded. "Thanks for everything, Mr. Woodville."

"It's been a pleasure, Miss LeMaire. I'll be in touch with you concerning probating of the will."

He walked off toward the front entrance. Sabrina and Jill followed the bellhop to the elevator.

All this time Abel Hicks, with the phone booth door open a crack, had been listening to every word said at the desk. Now he said into the phone, "She rented the fourth floor! The *entire* fourth floor!"

"You mean *every* room?" Bancroft asked.

"Every room. She made them move everybody else out."

"How many are in her party?"

"Just her and a female secretary. The bald-headed guy who came in with them didn't stay. I heard him say he had to make an important call."

"That would be Scott Woodville," Beau Creel's voice said in the swarthy man's ear. "Have they gone upstairs yet?"

Glancing toward the elevators, Hicks said, "They're just getting on an elevator."

"All right, Hicks," Bancroft's voice said. "You did well. You don't have to stick around there any longer."

"Okay, Mr. Bancroft," the swarthy man said. He hung up.

Twelve

Henry Bancroft hung up the phone. Kelly went over to the window to switch on the listening device for the electronic bugs in the suite at the Central Plaza Hotel. Beau Creel did a little restless pacing.

"Her own plane, and the whole fourth floor," he said enviously.

Over her shoulder Kelly said, "All that dough, and she's back for more."

"Money comes to money," Bancroft said a bit pompously.

Creel said, "Not if we get there first."

At the hotel the elevator door opened at the fourth floor and the bell hop led Sabrina and Jill along a hallway to a door marked 406. Inserting a key, he opened it, then let the two girls precede him into a large, handsomely furnished living room with bedrooms off either side of it. Following them in, he laid the two keys on a writing desk, crossed the room to open drapes in order to allow sunlight into the room, then went into the bedroom on the left.

On a table in the center of the living room was a

huge basket of cut flowers. Going over to look at it, Jill said, "Oh, Miss LeMaire, what beautiful flowers!"

Sabrina went over to look at them, too. "They are beautiful. I wonder who they could be from?"

"Maybe from your old friend Buz," Jill said dryly. "A pitch for forgiveness."

"I hardly think so," Sabrina said. "He's probably taken off for parts unknown. That strange incident still puzzles me. I always knew Buz was as unscrupulous as he was charming. He would sell his grandmother into white slavery for a decent price. But I can't image why they ever expected such a silly plot to work. The girl would have been exposed as a fraud the minute you showed up at Samarra, something that apparently never occurred to any of them. It should have occurred to Buz, certainly, because he knew you and he knew I never go anywhere without you. Perhaps it's true that criminals always make one glaring error."

"I still think you should have called the police," Jill said.

Sabrina made a dismissing gesture. "They put people in prison *forever* for kidnapping in this state. But I can tell you one thing. If he ever has the gall to show up at one of my parties again, I'll have the servants flog him."

"If you had taken me with you when you left France, it would never have happened," Jill said reproachfully. "I would have enjoyed using my karate knowledge on that tennis bum."

"I had to leave somebody behind to close the house and pack the rest of the stuff," Sabrina said. "Who could I trust but little Miss Efficiency?"

"I'm pleased that you find me efficient," Jill said with a touch of primness. "Oh, look, Miss LeMaire, there's a card."

The bellhop came from the bedroom he had entered and crossed to the other one as Sabrina took the small card from its envelope. While she was reading it, Jill spread the flower stalks to peer into

the center of the arrangement. Locating the electronic bug, she silently pointed to it. Sabrina nodded.

In Bancroft's office Sabrina's voice came from the speaker saying, "O-o-oh, listen. 'From an old family friend, Henry Bancroft.' "

Jill's voice asked, "Do you remember him?"

"Of course. He was Father's lawyer, and also his friend. He came to the house every Sunday. Father used to say, 'If there's one person in this world you can trust, it's Henry Bancroft.' "

This statement rather pleased the lawyer, until he saw the expressions with which Beau Creel and Kelly were regarding him. Neither one of them, he realized, would trust him as far as they could throw an elephant.

The bellhop's voice came from the speaker. "I set the temperature at seventy in all three rooms, Miss LeMaire. If you want it cooler or warmer, just adjust the thermostat. I'll let you know when the rest of the floor is ready."

"Thank you." Sabrina's voice said.

"Thank you, Miss LeMaire," the bellhop said in a pleased tone. "I'll bring up your luggage as soon as it arrives."

"Must be a big tipper," Creel growled. "First bellhop I ever heard sound pleased by the size of a tip."

Nothing came from the speaker for a time. An intercom on Bancroft's desk buzzed, and he switched it on. A feminine voice from the outer office said, "A Mr. Wilder for Mr. Creel, sir."

"Let him come in," Bancroft said.

The office door opened and Rick Wilder came in. He said to Beau Creel, "His name's Bosley. He's at that motel on the west end of town."

"What's he do?" Creel asked.

"On his registration card he said he was a bird-watcher."

Creel resumed the pacing he had stopped when Sabrina's and Jill's voices had started to come from

the speaker. "He came in on her plane, she takes a whole floor, and he stays at a motel. Why?"

"It's a cover," Kelly guessed.

The blond man swung toward her. "Cover for what?" he snapped.

Kelly shrugged. "Maybe we'll find out from that?" she said, pointing at the listening device on the windowsill.

At that moment a knocking sound came from the speaker, and Jill's voice said, "I'll get it."

"Quiet, everyone," Creel said. "They've got company."

Jill's voice said, "Hello, Mr. Bosley. Come in."

Creel said sourly, "Our friend the bird-watcher."

Sabrina's voice said from the speaker, "Right on time, as usual."

"Right on time for what?" Creel growled.

Kelly said in a tone of excitement, "It's about the deal. I can smell it!"

Creel, who had twice made comments himself after telling everyone else to be quiet, made a savage gesture for her to shut up.

In the hotel room Bosley had headed straight for the telephone. Lifting the receiver, but keeping the cutoff buttons depressed with the center finger of the hand holding the receiver, he unscrewed the mouth-piece. Spotting the bug inside, he screwed the mouth-piece back on again and hung up the phone.

So that there wouldn't be dead silence during this activity, Bosley and Jill made some ad lib conversation. Jill asked, "Can I get you a drink, Mr. Bosley?"

"Nothing, thank you," Bosley said. "Got to keep a clear head today."

"I should think you'd feel like celebrating," Jill said.

Bosley chuckled. "Odd thing, but I've never been overly impressed with money. I'm a man of simple habits, and my needs are few. But I must admit that suddenly to be within arm's length of a king's ransom—I only hope nothing goes wrong."

By then he had the phone back together again.

Sabrina said, "Nothing will go wrong, Mr. Bosley."
"That's very kind of you," he said gratefully. Then his tone became slightly worried. "The call should be here. He said eleven, and it's eleven now. He's *never* even thirty seconds late."

"It has to come through the hotel switchboard," Jill said reassuringly. "That will delay it a few seconds."

The phone rang.

"Ah, that'll be Los Angeles," Bosley said in a tone of relief. Picking it up, he said, "Bosley here."

Sabrina and Jill, of course, could only hear Bosley's side of the phone conversation. But the listeners in Bancroft's office could hear both sides coming from the speaker. A cultured voice familiar to Kelly, but strange to everyone else in the office, said, "Charlie. Can you talk?"

"No problem, sir," Bosley's voice said from the speaker.

"Well, what do you think? Is it still A-OK?"

"The tests are very promising, as I was just indicating to Miss LeMaire."

Charlie's voice became cautious. "You mean she's there with you now?"

"You could say that, sir," Bosley said discreetly.

"Okay, Bosley. Just answer this question yes or no. Just that, you understand? Yes or no. Did she sign?"

"No."

Charlie's voice became anguished. "Bosley, we're talking about millions! Will she?"

"I'm convinced of it, sir."

The relief in the caller's voice was palpable. "Good."

Beau Creel said with the grudging admiration of one killer shark for another, "They're carving her up."

In revenge for his shushing her, Kelly said, "Sh-h-h!" The blond man threw her a murderous look, but he remained silent.

Charlie's voice asked, "You'll make your final test when?"

"This afternoon, sir."

"Just one more thing, Bosley. If the test proves out, we'll have to move fast. We're done for if that Mideast gang gets wind of it. We can't outbid *them*."

"All ready at this end, sir. I can roll the minute you get the equipment here."

"Good. Those Iranians could double our offer of twenty million."

"I'm aware of that, sir."

"Call me back when you get her to sign, Bosley."

"Yes, sir," Bosley said.

There was the click of the phone being hung up. Bosley's voice said, "Well, he's still willing to pay if you're willing to sign, Miss LeMaire."

Sabrina's voice came from the speaker. "I can't very well sign before I inherit the place, and that can't be until after Saturday."

"Oh, you can sign a contingency agreement, Miss LeMaire. Didn't your attorney explain that? In the event you failed to inherit for some reason, the agreement would not be binding on either party."

"I think Mr. Woodville did mention something about that," Sabrina admitted.

"Then you'll sign?"

"I think I'd better phone Mr. Woodville to make sure."

"Well, you know where to reach me, Miss LeMaire," Bosley said a bit glumly.

"Yes, of course. Why don't you leave the papers with my secretary? If Mr. Woodville says okay, I'll sign them tonight."

Bosley's voice became considerably more cheerful. "Here you are. Well, good-bye."

The sound of a door closing came from the speaker. Creel said to Wilder, "Get going! You can get to the hotel before he gets downstairs. Don't let him out of your sight."

The freckled man hurried out.

From the speaker Sabrina's voice said, "You did arrange for a rented car, didn't you?"

"Yes, Miss LeMaire," Jill said. "But it was im-

possible to get a Rolls Royce, as you wanted. I had to settle for a Lincoln Continental."

"Well, I suppose that will do," Sabrina said.

"Phone down to have it sent around front. I'm going out to Samarra."

Those in Bancroft's office could hear Jill phoning down for the car. There was the sound of a door opening and closing, then again silence.

Creel looked at Kelly. "You'd better stay away from the house, if she's going to be there."

"She won't recognize me," Kelly said. "She was spaced out the whole time I was with her."

After considering this, he said, "Okay, in that case you'd better get back there before she does, so Rachel can fill you in on who you're supposed to be."

Nodding, Kelly went out also. Bancroft gazed at the door for a moment after it closed. "I don't trust that one," he said finally.

Creel said, "What makes you think I do?"

Thirteen

Aram Kellegian stood in the elaborately furnished living room of the mansion, not in the least ill at ease. As a matter of fact, it was Rachel LeMaire who seemed ill at ease. Aram's manner, if anything, was faintly hostile.

Nervously pouring herself a glass of wine at the service bar, Rachel said, "Why don't you sit down, Aram? Can I get you something to drink?"

"I don't want to sit down, Miss LeMaire," the tall young man said coldly. "And I don't want a drink. All I want is a straight answer. Are you go-

ing to see that the men get the overtime pay due them?"

"I told you Mr. Creel makes up the payroll, Aram. You should take it up with him."

"I've taken it up with Beau Creel," Aram flared. "All I get is promises. It's like fighting a room full of feathers."

"I'll speak to him," Rachel said.

"You'd better do more than speak to him, Mrs. LeMaire. I'll lay it on the line cold. Your fancy vineyards manager coerced the workers into voting against unionizing, and now that they have no union to complain to, he's grinding their noses in the dirt. So you'd better tell Mr. Beau Creel this: If the workers don't have their checks for overtime by this coming Monday, I'll have union organizers in here on Tuesday. And this time I'll guarantee you the workers will vote union. If you people don't shape up fast, you just may have this place struck in the middle of your harvest."

Making her back rigid, Rachel said in an attempt at haughtiness, "How dare you talk to me that way!" But her eyes shifted away when he gazed at her steadily, refusing to be cowed.

"You'll fire me if I don't show proper respect?" he asked sardonically. "That would really get you struck, lady. The workers are behind me one hundred percent, and frankly, they don't give one damn about you."

Strangely, it was Rachel who was cowed by these blunt words. Shifting tactics, she said in a reasoning tone, "I didn't say anything about firing you, Aram. But I don't understand why you would want to harm Samarra. You grew up here, and your father was a crew boss before you."

"Times change, and people change, Mrs. LeMaire. Your husband ran this place before you, and he always gave the workers a fair shake. Just deliver my message to Beau Creel, Mrs. LeMaire. And make it clear to him that it isn't just a suggestion. It's an ultimatum."

Turning, he strode out into the entry hall, and she heard the front door slam behind him. It slammed so hard that she was startled into spilling a few drops of her wine. She tossed off the rest in one gulp, and set down the glass.

A moment later she heard the back door open and close again. Then Kelly appeared in the archway, carrying her motorcycle helmet.

"Who left mad?" the girl inquired.

"One of the crew bosses with an imagined complaint. Did Janet LeMaire arrive?"

Kelly nodded. "She took the whole fourth floor of the hotel. And she's en route here right now. Beau said you and I better figure out who I'm supposed to be."

"Shouldn't you drop out of sight?" Rachel asked. "Won't she recognize you?"

"She never saw any of us but Buz until she was so full of dope she didn't know up from sideways. Later she saw Myra, after we stopped giving her dope and were just holding her, because Myra delivered her meals. But she never got a glimpse of me or Gus when she was in any kind of shape to remember us."

After considering this, Rachel said, "Well, if you think it's safe. You could be one of my relatives, visiting from Houston. That's where most of my relatives are. You could be my sister."

Kelly cocked an eyebrow at her. In a dry tone she asked, "Think she'd swallow sisters so far apart?"

Flushing, Rachel said a bit shortly, "Be a niece, then. My older sister in Houston has a daughter about your age named Georgette."

Forming her thumb and forefinger into an O, Kelly said, "Okay, I'm Georgette." Turning, she went back out into the entry hall and up the stairway.

Outside, Aram had trotted down the wide stone steps and angrily jerked open the door of the pickup on the driver's side. Mike gave him a tail-wagging

greeting when he climbed in, but Aram ignored the dog. Violently slamming the door, he started the engine and ground into low gear.

"You were right, pal," he said aloud, but to himself. "A living wage means one thing up here, and something else down the hill."

He burned rubber on the takeoff, and was traveling nearly fifty by the time he reached level ground at the bottom of the hill.

As he approached the curve where he had nearly collided with the girl on the motorcycle the previous day, he slowed down, but he was still traveling at a dangerous speed when he started around it. And he was suddenly confronted by a yellow Lincoln Continental sedan coming from the other direction.

Again he slammed on the brakes and went into a skid. But this time the other driver failed to swerve. Aram was the one forced to turn into the crossroad, and even with the brake pedal to the floor, he was going too fast to make it and stay on the road. He slued around the turn with squealing tires and skidded sideways into grapevines. They gave enough so that the truck wasn't damaged, but a section of vine was knocked down.

The Lincoln skidded to a halt just beyond the intersection, and a girl jumped out. Rushing over, she peered into the cab through the right-hand window. Aram was slumped over the wheel, but he wasn't hurt. He was merely disgusted with his own driving. Mike, who had slid off the seat onto the floor when the truck stopped so abruptly, clambered back onto the seat.

"I'm sorry," the girl said breathlessly. "Are you hurt?"

Shaking his head, Aram looked at her. She was about the same age as the girl on the motorcycle, just as dark and just as beautiful, but in a different way. There was something patrician about her, as though she were used to a degree of subservience from others.

"It was my fault," he said. "No harm done."

Then, when the dog licked the girl's face, causing her to back away, he said, "Down, Mike!"

He restarted the engine, which had died, backed into the center of the road, and got out of the truck. When a quick examination disclosed no damage to the truck, he turned back to the girl. She was examining him with a strange expression on her face, as though the dog's name had triggered some kind of reaction. She looked at Mike, at the pickup truck, then back at Aram.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Aren't you Aram? Aram Kellegian?"

"That's right," he said puzzledly, trying to imagine how she knew him.

She emitted a small laugh. "I was hoping you'd remember me. After all, we did swear a blood oath."

His eyes widened. After studying her closely, he said, "Janet LeMaire?"

She gave a smiling nod.

Aram smiled also. "This is getting to be some curve."

Obviously that meant nothing to her. She said, "You haven't changed a bit."

"I've grown over a foot," Aram said. "You've changed."

He got the strange impression that this put her on guard. "I have?" she asked.

"Little girls do grow up, they say. Sometimes into beautiful women."

She laughed, and this time he got the impression that his answer relieved her. She said, "How's the collarbone?"

He didn't let the suspicion aroused by this question show on his face. "Which collarbone is that?"

"Don't you remember? The time I fell out of the hayloft in the barn?"

"The barn?"

"Down by the river."

Aram emitted an unbelieving laugh with no humor in it. "You know, I'm getting pretty tired of meeting Janet LeMaires every day."

Suddenly she was fully on guard. "W-what did you say, Aram?"

"What the devil are you two up to?"

"What two?"

"You and the one yesterday. The one who filled She stared at him. "Aram, have you gone mad?"

"You can turn it off, honey," he said in a bored voice. "There never was a barn down by the river, with or without a hayloft. I made it up to test your friend."

There was a long period of silence as the girl examined him anxiously. He examined her in return, but only with curiosity.

Presently she asked, "Are you going to give me away?"

"Give me a reason I shouldn't."

"I could but I'm not allowed to." After another long pause, she asked, "Did you tell anyone about yesterday's Janet LeMaire?"

"No, I didn't."

"Why not?"

Aram shrugged. "Well, anything she could do to shake up those two on the hill was okay with me." He smiled a touch bitterly. "You know, it's too bad one of you wasn't for real."

"Why?" she asked, surprised.

"The girl I used to know had spunk. She would have changed things around here."

"What things, Aram? May I call you Aram?"

"Why not?" he inquired with another shrug. "She would change the way workers are treated at Samarra these days. Ever since old man LeMaire disappeared, it's been tough for the people down the hill to get a fair deal."

"Things are going to change, Aram. If you just don't give me away."

Aram gave her a long, searching look. She gazed back at him steadily, and for some reason he didn't understand, he got an impression of trustworthiness from her, despite having caught her in an imposter's role.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Sabrina."

"You can't tell me what you're up to?"

"No."

"But it's against the pair up on the hill?"

She nodded.

"Okay," he said. "Go shake 'em up, Sabrina."

He climbed back into the truck, backed some more to the intersection, and drove off in the direction he had been driving.

Sabrina gazed after the truck musingly, wondering if she could trust the man to remain silent. Then she shrugged. She had no choice but to trust him, because if he revealed her as an imposter, the entire plan would blow up. All she could do was play out her role and hope he kept his knowledge to himself.

Climbing back into the Lincoln, she drove on to the mansion.

The door was answered by a woman Sabrina recognized from her photographs as Rachel LeMaire. Smiling at her, Sabrina said, "Hi, I'm Janet LeMaire."

Giving her a nervous smile in response to Sabrina's warm one, Rachel stepped aside to let her in. "How nice to see you. I'm Rachel, your father's, ah, widow."

"Yes, I assumed you were," Sabrina said. "I vaguely recall you, but it's been so many years, and I was so young."

"Did you have a nice flight?" Rachel asked, closing the door and leading the way into the front room.

"Oh, yes. It's only a hop up here from L.A. The trip from France was a little boring, though." She looked around the front room. "It all looks the same, yet somehow different than I remember. What happened to Father's bust of Beethoven?"

"It was broken by a servant."

"Oh. Speaking of servants, I suppose all those who worked here when I left have long since retired. They were all getting pretty old then."

Rachel nodded, "You wouldn't know any of the present ones, because none have been here more than a couple of years."

"Where are they, incidentally?" Sabrina asked. "I don't recall my mother ever answering the door. Our butler did it."

Rachel flushed slightly. "They're all temporarily off." Then, seeming to think this required some explanation, she improvised one Sabrina knew was strictly off the top of her head, because she also knew the real reason they were gone was because Rachel and her lover hadn't wanted any witnesses around for murder. "I was planning to fly to Houston for a few days to visit relatives, but after I let the servants go, a relative from there showed up here. So I canceled my plans." She emitted an unconvincing little laugh. "Now I find myself doing something I haven't done in years. Housework and cooking."

There was the sound of someone descending the stairs, then Kelly walked into the room.

Rachel said, "My niece, Georgette Baxter, Janet. Vincent's daughter, Janet LeMaire, Georgette."

The two girls smiled at each other. Kelly murmured, "A pleasure," and Sabrina said, "Nice to know you."

Both of them meant it.

Fourteen

Rachel said, "Will you sit down, Janet? You'll stay for lunch, won't you? It must getting around lunchtime."

Taking a chair, Sabrina glanced at her watch.

"Fifteen minutes until noon. I don't want to be any trouble."

"I have to fix lunch for the rest of us anyway," Rachel said. "In addition to Georgette and me, Mr. Creel will be here. And I think he's bringing along Henry Bancroft."

"Oh, I would love to see Mr. Bancroft," Sabrina said, beaming. "He sent flowers to my hotel suite. Yes, I'll be glad to stay."

"I'd better start getting it ready," Rachel said, moving toward the archway. "I'll let Georgette entertain you." In the archway she paused and turned. "I knew you were planning to stay at the hotel instead of here, Janet, because your lawyer told me. But why? You're certainly welcome here."

Beaming again, Sabrina said, "Oh, I'll be moving in Friday, in order to qualify under the will. My lawyer says moving in any earlier than that isn't necessary. Meantime I have a few business matters to attend to that will involve a lot of people running in and out, and it's simply more convenient for them if I'm at the hotel."

"I see," Rachel said. "Well, if you'll excuse me, I'll start lunch."

When she was gone, Kelly went over to seat herself on the sofa opposite Sabrina and grinned at her. "You did a nice job at the hotel," she said in a low voice. "They gulped the bait, hook and all."

"I didn't do so well on the way here," Sabrina said ruefully. "I ran into your friend Aram Kellegian and blew my cover."

"How?" Kelly asked, concerned.

"That tip you gave Woodville about the barn by the river and the broken collarbone backfired. That was a test to see if you were authentic. There isn't any barn by the river."

Kelly's eyes widened. "You mean he knew I was a fake, too?"

Sabrina nodded. "He's not going to blow the whistle, though. He doesn't like Creel and Rachel."

"Well, that's something, anyway," Kelly said with relief. "How much did you have to tell him?"

"Nothing. He decided to take me on faith."

"You always did have a way with tall, dark and handsome men," Kelly said, grinning again. "How's Jill?"

"Perfect in her part. You heard her, didn't you?"

Kelly nodded. "She sounded so prim, I could hardly keep from laughing. Imagine Jill a sexless spinster type."

"It takes some imagination," Sabrina agreed. "But she's playing it beautifully."

They heard the front door open, then Beau Creel and Henry Bancroft walked into the room. The lawyer immediately went over to Sabrina and bent to take both her hands.

"Janet!" he said warmly. "You've grown up, but I'd recognize you anywhere. You've grown up beautiful, incidentally."

"Why, thank you, Mr. Bancroft. It is Mr. Bancroft, isn't it? It's been so long."

"It is I, all right," Bancroft affirmed. "But you're a big girl now. You can call me Henry." He gave her hands a little squeeze before releasing them.

"Thank you for the flowers, Henry. They're beautiful. Such a lovely surprise for my homecoming."

"Lovely flowers for a lovely girl," the lawyer said gallantly.

It suddenly struck Kelly that neither Beau Creel nor Henry Bancroft knew who she was supposed to be. To avoid awkwardness, she solved the problem by saying, "Henry Bancroft. Aunt Rachel has told me about you, Mr. Bancroft. I'm Georgette Baxter, her niece from Houston."

"How do you do, Georgette?" the lawyer said with a gracious bow.

Picking it up, Creel said, "Yes, Rachel's niece, Georgette. Excuse me for not introducing you, Henry." He looked at Sabrina. "I don't suppose you remember me, Miss LeMaire."

Studying him, she said, "Your face is familiar. Didn't you work for father?"

He nodded. "Beau Creel."

"Of course. One of the truck drivers."

"I manage the vineyards now, Miss LeMaire."

"Well, well. You've risen in the world. Congratulations."

"Thank you," Creel said, not sure from her tone whether she meant it or was being sardonic.

Rachel came into the room. "Hello, Henry," she said. "I'm glad Beau brought you to lunch. It's all ready. Just cold meats, cheeses, and salad, but it's too warm for anything else."

"That sounds perfect," the lawyer said. "Accompanied by a sip of cool wine."

It was a pleasant enough luncheon. While Creel, Rachel, and Bancroft all had to be under strain, they all managed to conceal it under assumed affability. Sabrina suspected from Rachel's slightly slurred speech that she had further subdued her own nervousness with several glasses of wine prior to the one she sipped during lunch. The woman showed no evidence other than her slurred speech of being intoxicated, though.

Sabrina played her part to the hilt reveling in the opportunity to be a rich and pampered member of the international jet set, knowing that her audience, or at least all of it except Kelly, was dazzled by her supposed wealth and social status. She expertly fanned their envy by casually mentioning a few celebrities, including one British duke who was an internationally famous sportsman and a prince who was an equally famous lover, whom, she implied without actually saying so, were close personal friends of hers.

After lunch they all returned to the living room for coffee. All took seats except Sabrina, who set her cup on an end table and began wandering around the room, now playing the part of the prodigal returned home and trying to revive distant, barely recalled memories. The others sat and watched her

performance with varying emotions: Creel and Bancroft with fascination, Rachel with fear that soon the mansion reviving these memories would only be a memory for her, Kelly with concealed amusement.

Running a finger lovingly along the fireplace mantelpiece, Sabrina said, "I used to hang my stocking here every Christmas."

She trailed her fingers across the heavy oaken table with the lion's-paw legs, then paused before the Steinway piano to pick out with one finger a few bars of Brahms' "Lullaby."

"Still the same lovely tone," she murmured.

She moved on to peer out the French windows. "My tree," she said joyously. "I used to climb down it when I was supposed to be asleep, and go meet a boy named Aram Kellegian. And no one ever knew."

Rachel looked startled by mention of the name. Seated next to Creel on the sofa, she leaned toward him and said in a low voice, "Aram was here today. I'll tell you about it later."

Turning away from the windows to face the others, Sabrina said in a tone almost of reverence, "What can I say? It's home."

Creel said, "That lawyer fellow, Woodville, I guess he told you about the imposter?"

"Yes," Sabrina said, frowning. "I'll have to speak to the sheriff about her. Mr. Woodville misunderstood my desires when he told you to have her arrested. I want charges against her dropped."

"She hasn't been arrested," Creel said. "She never came back to the house. She must have realized we suspected her."

"Well, there's no problem, then," Sabrina said in a tone of relief. "I would just as soon forget the whole experience. Did Mr. Woodville tell you what she did to me?"

"Only that she was pretending to be you."

"She was part of a gang that kidnapped me and kept me drugged for nearly two weeks. To get infor-

mation out of me so that she could pretend to be Janet LeMaire, I've now begun to realize."

"That must have been an awful experience," Rachel said.

"Fortunately all I can remember about it is a voice. Some dreadful girl bending over me, asking question after question. Quite possibly the girl who was here."

She had continued her wandering as she spoke, and she now halted directly in front of Kelly's chair to look down at her. A thoughtful expression appeared on her face, causing Rachel, Creel, and Bancroft to hold their breaths.

"So you're Rachel's niece," Sabrina said. "Georgette, was it?"

Kelly nodded. "Georgette Baxter. From Houston."

Sabrina smiled. "You're very pretty."

"Thank you," Kelly said.

The trio released their held breaths. Bancroft asked, "Why don't you want the imposter prosecuted, Janet?"

"Because I would have to testify against the whole gang eventually. And one member happens to be an ex-friend. I prefer just to forget the whole thing."

Creel said, "Must be a nice feeling to be home again, safe and sound."

"Oh, it is."

Bancroft said, "And after Saturday, Samarra's all yours."

Smiling at him, she said, "Well, not really, Henry."

They all stared at her. Rachel asked, "What does that mean?"

"After Saturday it may belong to me by law, but not by right. You know as well as I do that I'm inheriting on a technicality. What father wanted was for me to return while he was still *here*, not just legally still alive when in all probability he's actually been dead for years."

"Well, granted it's a technicality," the lawyer said. "But there's no question about your legal rights. You *will* inherit."

"An inheritance can be signed away, Henry." Looking at Rachel, she said, "As I've grown older, I've gradually realized that mother lied to me about both Father and you, Rachel. She was a bitter woman who couldn't forgive her rejection. I know you made Father happy, and after the love and care you've given to Samarra all these years, I couldn't dream of taking it from you permanently."

"You're letting me keep it?" Rachel said, somewhat dazed.

Sabrina said simply, "In a word, yes."

Bancroft and Creel both looked as startled as Rachel. Kelly said, "That's the most generous thing I've ever heard of."

Sabrina dismissed this with a wave of her hand. "It's easy to be generous when you're the only niece of a number of rich relatives, all of whom died childless. I've been very lucky." She glanced at Bancroft. "You can work out the details with Mr. Woodville, can't you, Henry?"

"Of course."

"Actually the will is going to be probated as a matter of formality," Sabrina said. "Mr. Woodville advised me to do it that way, then deed it back to Rachel, less the one small piece I want to keep."

Six ears pricked up at that. Creel threw a quick look at Rachel, who was quick enough on the uptake, despite her wine consumption, to repeat. "One small piece?"

Sabrina said, "I met an old man once in a lamasery in Tibet. He taught me that the true power of money is giving, leaving something to show that your life has been useful. Wherever I've gone, I've tried to follow his advice. A tiny church in an Indian pueblo, a home for unwed mothers in Rome. And now here, at Samarra, I want to leave something in its own beautiful setting. Something that will last forever. A bird sanctuary."

"A bird sanctuary?" Creel said in a slightly high voice.

Sabrina nodded. "That's why I'm letting the will

go through probate," she said brightly. "Because when I deed it back to Rachel, I'm going to exclude that worthless forty acres down at the south end."

"The swamp?" Rachel asked.

"It's no use to you, Rachel, and the birds would love it. You don't mind, do you?"

"No, of course not," Rachel said quickly.

Sabrina glanced at her watch. "I hate to rush off so quickly after lunch, but I have a business appointment. Thanks for the lunch, Rachel. It was lovely. And it was so nice seeing all of you."

Jumping to her feet, Rachel said, "I'll see you out."

The men rose to their feet also, murmuring the conventional things people say when parting. Rachel and Sabrina together moved into the entry hall and to the front door.

Sabrina said, "I'm happy you agreed with my plan."

"It's a very small thing to ask," Rachel told her.

Pausing with the front door open, Sabrina said mistily, "We'll call it the Vincent LeMaire sanctuary, after my father, wherever he is."

She looked back at the entry hall and the living room beyond, both as vast and vaulted as a medieval castle. "It's all as I remember it," she said wistfully. "Except, somehow I thought it was larger."

Fifteen

The other three were waiting in silence when Rachel reentered the living room. Creel and Bancroft had resumed their seats, but Kelly was over at the front windows, peering out. The sound of the Lincoln driving off came to them.

Turning, Kelly expelled a deep breath. "Bird sanctuary! I'll bet that dame never did a charitable act in her life." She looked at Rachel. "She's tossing this place in your lap because it's peanuts compared to twenty million dollars. Or forty million, maybe, according to that guy on the phone named Charlie."

"Whatever it is, it's obviously in the swamp," Bancroft said.

Beau Creel chuckled.

"What's funny?" Kelly asked.

"Little Miss Janet is in for a big surprise when the will is probated. She's not going to inherit the swamp."

Kelly did her best to look blank.

"The swamp has been sold," Henry Bancroft explained. "Rachel sold it to a man named Hawkins."

Kelly put a puzzled expression on her face. "Was that legal?"

"Oh, quite. Actually it was sold by the corporation. Samarra is incorporated, you know. Her husband was president of the corporation, and she was vice-president at the time he disappeared. In his absence she has full authority to act for the corporation in such matters. The money didn't go to her personally, you see, but into corporate funds. It's an

iron clad sales contract. I know, because I drew it up. There is no way Janet could have it declared invalid and force the property to be returned to the estate."

Creel said, "We won't have any trouble buying it back from Hawkins. He's begging to sell for half what he paid."

"We'd better find out what's there first," Rachel said. She went over to uncork a wine decanter at the service bar.

"You can knock that off," Creel said in a definite tone. "You're already half smashed."

Flushing, she looked at him. "I didn't have any more wine at lunch than anyone else."

"At lunch, no," he agreed. "How many glasses did you have before lunch? You couldn't even talk straight until you got a little food into you."

Pushing the cork back into the decanter, she went to seat herself next to Bancroft on the sofa.

Attempting to ignore the incident, the lawyer said, "Now that the property is out of corporate hands, anyone at all can buy it. I'll draw up a sales contract making us all joint owners."

"With me as fifty-percent owner and you three owning the other fifty percent," Kelly put in.

"Hawkins's price is ten thousand," Creel drawled. "You got five to put up?"

After staring at him for a moment, Kelly said, "The ten grand can come out of the profit before we split."

"What could you do if we decided to squeeze you out altogether?" Creel inquired.

"Go to Janet," Kelly said promptly. "If she finds out before Saturday that she *doesn't* inherit the swamp, she's going to get in on the bidding. With all her money, think you people could outbid her?"

Bancroft said in a reasoning tone, "Let's not squabble. We'll stick to our original agreement, Kelly. Providing we buy the property at all. I'm with Rachel on that. Let's find out what this is all about before we jump."

They heard the back door open and close again, and a moment later the redheaded Rick Wilder appeared in the archway. After a glance around the room, he gestured that he wanted to see Creel in private.

"You can talk in front of all of us," Kelly said. "There's supposed to be honor among thieves, and we're all thieves in this together."

"Yeah, it's all right," Creel told him. "What you got?"

The freckled man shrugged. "That bird-watcher is out in the swamp in a boat."

"In a boat?" Creel said. "What kind of boat?"

"One of those inflatable rafts with an outboard motor. He launched it from the east side of the swamp, where the water comes up nearly to the public road there."

"What's he doing?" Bancroft asked.

Wilder shrugged again. "I hightailed it over here soon as he took off from shore."

"Well, get back there and keep an eye on him," Creel ordered. "I'll be along in a few minutes."

The freckled man lifted one hand in acknowledgment, then turned and headed back for the kitchen. They heard the back door open and close again.

Getting up from his seat, Beau Creel crossed the entry hall into the game room. Through the twin archways they could see him unlocking a gun rack. Bancroft walked out into the entry hall with a concerned expression on his face. Kelly decided to trail along.

Creel came from the game room carrying a double-barreled shotgun that looked to Kelly like a twelve-gauge. Breaking it, he shoved shells into both chambers and snapped it shut again.

"What are you going to do with *that*?" Bancroft demanded.

"Catch me a trespasser."

"He's not trespassing on Sammara property," the lawyer said. "It belongs to Hawkins."

"I don't think the trespasser knows that," Creel said. "Janet obviously doesn't, and we all know she sent him."

He went on out the front door.

At the east edge of the swamp, concealed in underbrush, Rick Wilder watched the plump man out on the water in the inflatable raft. The man was dressed in worn slacks, a cloth jacket over a T-shirt, and a visored cap. With a long steel tube pressed down into the muddy slime of the bottom he was taking samplings of the pond bed, which he was putting into small steel cylinders with stoppers. He worked swiftly, moving from place to place, so absorbed in his work that he seemed oblivious to his surroundings.

Hearing a car pull off on the shoulder of the seldom traveled two-lane road behind him, Wilder turned to see it was Creel's Mercedes convertible. Stepping from his place of hiding long enough to wave to the blond man, Wilder immediately stepped back into the concealing underbrush again. Moments later Creel moved up alongside of him, the double-barreled shotgun held muzzle down in the crook of his arm.

"Doesn't look like he's after birds," Wilder said.

The man on the raft found something that excited him. Eagerly he poured sludge into a steel cylinder and capped it.

"Not unless they fly underwater," Creel said.

The plump man started the raft's motor and headed for shore. Creel stepped from the underbrush and headed down to the edge of the water. Wilder trailed after him.

John Bosley looked at the two men uncertainly as he beached the raft. Creel was now carrying the shotgun in trail position, and while the muzzles weren't pointing at Bosley, they weren't exactly aimed away from him either.

"Good morning," Creel said pleasantly.

"Oh, good morning," Bosley said, making his tone cheerful.

"This is private property," Creel said less pleasantly. "What were you doing out there?"

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry," Bosley said. "I didn't know." He indicated a pair of binoculars lying on the raft. "I was bird-watching. Wonderful hobby, our feathered friends. I've made a few remarkable discoveries this morning." His voice became brightly eager. "First time the speckled robin's been seen this far north for years."

"By any chance did you see a lying swallow?" Creel drawled.

Furrowing his brow, Bosley said, "I don't believe I know the species."

"I'm looking at one," Creel said, gazing at him steadily.

Bosley gave him an uneasy smile. "I don't understand."

"You're no more bird-watcher than I am," Creel said bluntly.

Straightening his back indignantly, Bosley said, "I'm a life member of the Audubon Society."

"Aw, cut the act, Mr. Bosley," Creel said in a bored tone. He hefted the shotgun slightly. "Why don't you come ashore?"

Bosley scrambled from the raft onto shore and pulled the inflated raft up farther on land. "How do you know my name?" he inquired.

"I know everything about you, Mr. Bosley," Creel informed him. "Including your phone call from Charlie—about the tests, and the equipment Charlie's going to send you. But when you were talking to him, I didn't hear one word about a speckled robin."

The plump man exhibited such horror that he actually twitched. "Please," he said in a panicky voice. "If Charlie finds out I've blown my cover, I'll lose my job."

"What is your job?"

Bosley shook his head. "I beg of you, don't ask

me. You don't know the people you're dealing with. They're powerful. They can topple governments."

Creel leveled the shotgun at Bosley's stomach. In a suddenly deadly voice he said, "If you don't talk, the only bird around here is going to be a dead duck."

Bosley gazed at the twin muzzles in petrified silence. Creel cocked the gun.

"You've got five seconds," he said. "If you aren't spilling everything you know by then, I'm going to blow you apart. What is it you're sitting on that's worth millions?"

In a pleading voice Bosley said, "It wouldn't do you any good to know. The deal's all tied up so tight, there's no way any outsider could get in on it. All you'll do is get me in trouble for talking."

"One," Creel counted.

"Please!"

"Two."

"Don't you understand? It's a closed setup."

"Three."

"I'll lose my job."

"Four!"

"Oil!" Bosley blurted.

"Oil?" Creel repeated. "Here?"

Bosley rapidly nodded his head, seeming to be on the verge of crying.

"How much oil?" Creel asked.

"A major field. Probably the biggest in this country in fifty years."

The blond man emitted a soundless whistle. He peered out over the swamp, as though expecting to see oil gurgling up from beneath the water. Then he refocused his gaze on the man who claimed to be a bird-watcher.

"Who's Charlie?"

"I'm not at liberty to reveal that," Bosley said.

Creel centered the shotgun on the man's stomach. "Five," he said.

"All I have is a phone number," Bosley bleated

in apparent terror. "I don't even know his last name. All I know is he represents . . ."

When he let it trail off, Creel said, "Represents who or what?"

Sighing, Bosley gave up all resistance. "An international cartel that plans to develop the field. But none of this is going to do you any good. They have the property all tied up."

"What's that phone number you know?" Creel asked.

"Charlie's, you mean?"

"Charlie's, I mean," Creel said patiently.

Bosley sighed again. "It's 479-9937."

"Where?"

"West L.A. Area code 213."

Creel lowered the muzzles of the shotgun and uncocked the weapon. He said to Wilder, "Stay with him until he gets that raft deflated and loaded in his car trunk and gets out of here."

"You mean you want I should let him go?" the freckled man asked in mild surprise.

"What else?" Creel inquired irritably.

He strode off in the direction of his car.

Sixteen

Back at the mansion Creel drove around back instead of parking in front, and went in by the back door. He used the kitchen extension to dial the phone number Bosley had given him.

A feminine voice answered, "XO Oil Corporation."
Creel hung up.

Going up the narrow hall from the kitchen to the entry hall, he glanced into the living room, saw

Rachel, Kelly, and Bancroft still waiting there, and turned into the game room. After unloading the shotgun and locking it back in the rack, he crossed to the living room. The three there all looked at him inquiringly.

"Oil," he said.

"Oil?" Kelly said. "How much?"

"Enough to make Texas look like a country gas station."

All three of them stared at Creel with growing excitement. "Are you sure?" Rachel asked. "In the swamp?"

"Under the swamp."

Creel nodded. "He was very cooperative."

"You didn't—ah—" The lawyer let it trail off.

"No, we didn't—ah. We let him go."

"Won't he run straight to Janet to tell her you know?" Kelly asked.

Creel shook his head. "He's not going to mention it. Too afraid he'll lose his job. He thinks the information isn't going to do me any good because the cartel he's working for has the deal all tied up. He doesn't know that the heiress they're dealing with doesn't own the property, of course."

"Maybe we ought to check things out before we jump," Henry Bancroft suggested.

"We did. We persuaded the bird-watcher to give us Charlie's phone number. I just dialed it. Know who Charlie is?"

"Who?" Kelly asked.

"XO Oil."

"That's good enough for me," Kelly said. "If XO Oil is after it, I'm a true believer."

"I think XO is only part of it," Creel said. "It's an international cartel."

"Hey, something just hit me!" Kelly announced with excitement. "Remember this Charlie mentioned over the phone something about a Mideast gang? Then later I think he said, 'Those Iranians could double our offer of twenty million.'"

"We all heard that," Bancroft said.

Kelly focused her attention on Creel. "Beau, do you also remember that news item on TV last night about executives of an Iranian oil company being in this country secretly to negotiate the development of a major new oil field in the United States?"

Creel looked startled. After reflecting, he said, "I wasn't paying too much attention, but yes, I do remember something like that."

"The announcer said many millions of dollars were involved," Kelly said eagerly. "If we can get hold of that swamp, we can get this international cartel and those Arabs bidding against each other. Maybe forty million isn't even the limit."

The others were all silent for a long time, reveling in the thought of untold millions of dollars falling into their laps.

Finally Henry Bancroft said huskily, "You'd better get moving on Hawkins, Beau, before anyone else learns he owns that swamp instead of Janet, and makes him an offer."

"I'll get over there right now," the blond man said, again striding from the room.

The big red-haired man watched in silence as John Bosley loaded the deflated raft, the outboard motor, and his testing equipment and samples into the trunk of his rented Ford sedan. Bosley slammed the trunk lid and climbed behind the steering wheel.

Peering out at the big man, he said tentatively, "Well, good-bye."

Rick Wilder merely gave him a cold nod.

Bosley started the engine and drove off. In the rearview mirror he saw the red-haired man climb into a pickup truck parked a short distance behind where Bosley had been parked. Bosley drove at slow speed, so as to keep the reflection of the truck in his rearview mirror for as long as possible. He watched it drive off and turn right at the south edge of the swamp onto the road that was the southern boundary of both the swamp and the Samarra Vineyards.

A half mile farther on, Bosley swung the sedan

into a farmer's lane, backed up, and headed the other way. He drove a short distance beyond the north edge of the swamp, parked on the shoulder on the opposite side of the road from where he had previously been parked, and crossed the road on foot. He hurried along the shore edging the north side of the swamp to the two-room cabin.

The front door of the cabin led into a large room that served as a combination kitchen, dining room, and living room. Off it to the right was a single bedroom. The main room was empty, but on a round wooden table in its center lay a bolt-action thirty-caliber rifle, a cleaning rod, a can of oil, and a box of cartridges.

Pausing just inside the doorway, Bosley called anxiously, "Jill?"

He looked relieved when Jill Munroe appeared from the bedroom. After examining her, he also looked impressed by the transformation she had undergone. She was a totally different girl from the prim, stiff-backed secretary who had gotten off the plane with Sabrina. Gone were the glasses and the mouse-brown wig. Her blonde hair tumbled about her shoulders in glorious disarray, she wore a loose-fitting gingham dress of red and white checks, and she was barefoot.

The biggest change was in her manner and movements, though. The secretarial primness was replaced by an almost sensual earthiness, and instead of the stiff, swayless walk of the secretary, she moved with the peasant grace of a swamp girl. She carried a piece of white cloth in her hand.

"Hi, Bosley," she said. "I forgot cleaning patches, so I had to tear a piece from a bed sheet." She indicated the piece of cloth. "I watched your confab with Creel and his goon from the bedroom window. How'd it go?"

"Perfect. I let the information be forced out of me." After a pause he added candidly, "Actually it wasn't a difficult acting job. Looking down those shotgun barrels, I might have confessed everything

even if there was oil underneath this godforsaken swamp."

Jill went over to seat herself at the table and began to rip the scrap of bed sheet into small squares to serve as gun patches. "You'd better get moving," she said. "Creel shouldn't take long to get here if he really swallowed the bait. Your kit's on the dresser in the bedroom, and your costume's laid out on the bed."

Bosley went into the bedroom and closed the door. A tattered pair of bib overalls and the top to a pair of long johns lay on the bed. On the floor next to the bed there was also a pair of heavy work shoes. Stripping to his underwear, he put on the long-underwear top, the overalls, and the shoes.

On the dresser there was a theatrical makeup kit. Standing before the mirror, Bosley darkened his face and hands to a weather-beaten texture, added a profusion of wrinkles, then affixed wispy white whiskers to his cheeks and chin with spirit gum. A wig of stringy snow-white hair completed the makeup job.

Going out into the other room, he asked in a frail, twangy voice straight out of the Mississippi River delta country, "How do I look, grandatter?"

Looking at him, Jill burst out laughing. "About ninety," she said. "And you sound at least a hundred and three. You look like the guest of honor at a wake."

In his normal voice Bosley said with the pleasure of having talent appreciated, "Glad you like it."

"I never realized you were such a good actor, Bosley," Jill said. "Were you ever on the stage?"

"Just little theater," Bosley said modestly. "But I did get some excellent reviews in my hometown paper. You're rather a good actress yourself, you know."

The sound of a car engine approaching caused both of them to peer through the open front door. They saw Beau Creel's Mercedes convertible park on the narrow access road about fifty yards in front of the cabin.

Jill had finished cleaning the rifle. Quickly she loaded it and levered a round into the chamber.

"Here we go," she said.

Bosley moved to one side of the door. Resting her elbows on the table, Jill aimed the rifle through the open door and squinted over the sights. Beau Creel got out of the convertible and approached the cabin.

The instant he crossed over the line from Samarra property onto her own property, Jill squeezed off a shot. Dirt erupted inches in front of Creel's feet, spattering his shoes. He came to an abrupt halt.

"Hold it!" the blond man called out. "Look, I know we've had run-ins, but I'm here to set it all straight. How about it, Hawkins?"

The only answer from inside was the sound of a rifle bolt being drawn back to set another round in the chamber.

"Hawkins?" Creel called uneasily.

"Ain't here," Jill called back in a twangy drawl.

Creel looked surprised that it was a woman who had shot at him. He peered toward the cabin, but could only dimly make out the figure seated inside at the table.

Apparently assuming it was Anna Hawkins, he called, "When's he coming back?"

"Ain't," Jill said.

There was a period of silence while Creel thought this over. Finally he asked, "Can we talk?"

"Just stand where you are," Jill ordered.

Getting up from the table, she went over to the door and stepped out onto the porch.

Seventeen

Beau Creel stared at the girl on the porch in astonishment. She was like something out of Dogpatch, U.S.A., lovely but totally uncivilized. She carried the rifle expertly, casually resting, muzzle down, in the crook of her arm, but gripped so that she could flip it upward and fire it one-handed in an instant, if necessary.

He took a tentative step toward her, but halted again when she raised the rifle muzzle.

"I don't want to yell," he called.

After considering this, she nodded. "You kin come a little closer," she called back.

He approached carefully, again abruptly halting fifty feet away when she said sharply, "That's close enough."

"I'm Beau Creel," he said, his gaze uneasily on the rifle muzzle aimed directly at him.

"I know who y'are. Mr. Hawkins warned us about you when we bought the place."

Startled, the blond man said, "You bought it?"

"Sure did. Give Mr. Hawkins what he had in it. Twenty-two thousand, five hundred dollars. Him and his wife went back to Arizona."

In the doorway behind the girl appeared an ancient, weather-beaten figure with snow-white hair and a wispy white beard. In a frail voice he croaked, "Who is it, Jilly-Lou?"

Without turning around, the girl said, "Calls himself Beau Creel."

Gazing nearsightedly at a stump a dozen feet to Creel's left, the old man said fretfully, "Can't see a

thing without my glasses. Go find me my glasses, Jilly-Lou."

"Later, Grandpa."

Still staring at the stump, the old man said, "Husky fellow, but awful short. Is he a dwarf, Jilly-Lou?"

"No, Grandpa, he's full size."

"Sure looks like a dwarf. What's he want?"

Examining Creel suspiciously, the girl said, "Don't know yet."

Creel said, "I've come here with a generous business proposition." He gave her what he hoped was a warm smile.

The girl said, "I don't trust a man whose teeth don't show when he smiles."

Creel made an effort to show his teeth. "When Hawkins sold you this land, I suppose he forgot to mention it was worthless."

"Didn't have to. Any fool could see that. Mostly swamp."

His smile faded. "Then why buy it?" he asked suspiciously.

"You wouldn't understand. Grandpa always wanted to find the right piece of land where he could live out his days. Born in a swamp, he was, like me and my ma and pa. Bayou down near the mouth of Big Muddy." Her tone became nostalgic. "Far as you could see, tree stumps rottin' in the slime, alligators snappin', the hummin' of mosquitoes." Then her tone saddened. "But it weren't our'n."

"Where'd you get the money to buy this place?"

"Insurance," the girl said promptly. "City-slicker salesman thought he was slickerin' Pa when he sold him a five-thousand-dollar policy on Ma. Near kept Pa broke for six months, but then she up and died. Same salesman slickered him into takin' out twenty-five thousand on hisself, using the money from Ma to pay the premiums; then he up and died. I still got some left over after payin' spot cash for this here place."

Behind her the old man croaked, "Got to find

my glasses so I kin see who you're talkin' to." He disappeared from sight.

Creel said, "What if you had enough money to buy a bigger place?"

"How much money you talkin' about?"

"How does twenty-five thousand sound?"

The old man appeared in the doorway again. "Can't find the blamed glasses," he complained in his frail voice. "What's he after, Jilly-Lou?"

"Tryin' to steal the place away from us, the sound of it."

"You won't let him?" the old man said anxiously.

"Don't worry, Grandpa."

Peering at the stump again, Grandpa said, "Shoot him if ye have to. He's trespassin'."

"I kin handle him," the girl assured the old man.

"And the same goes for that Ayrab, if he comes back." He disappeared from the doorway again.

After staring at the vacant doorway, Creel re-focused his attention on the girl. "Arab?"

The blonde nodded. "Said he was from Iran."

"What'd *he* want?"

"Same as you. Our swamp. Had a whole bag full of cash."

"How much did he offer?"

"Hundred thousand," she said casually. "Said he'd go higher."

Beau Creel mentally cursed himself. Two days previously he could have bought the place from Hawkins for ten thousand. Now, unless he moved fast, there was a strong chance that he wouldn't get it for any price. He asked, "What'll you take?"

"Why'd you want it so bad?" she countered.

"We're going to make it into a bird sanctuary. How about a hundred and fifty thousand?"

Frowning, she said, "That's what that Ayrab fellow said, too. A bird sanctuary. Said there's some rare birds in here you can't find nowhere else. Ain't seen any myself, though. Just common ordinary birds, look like to me."

"How about it?" Creel asked, sweating. "A hundred and fifty thousand."

"I don't know," she said uncertainly. "I told you we're swamp folk, and money don't mean all that much to us. Where'd we find another place like this?"

"Two hundred thousand!"

Grandpa appeared in the doorway again. "I heard that! Git rid of him, Jilly-Lou!"

"He's goin', Grandpa."

She stepped down from the porch, but with the muzzle of the rifle lowered, and motioned Creel back in the direction of his car. Companionably she fell in at his side.

Peering after them nearsightedly, Grandpa called, "Jilly-Lou! Where you goin', Jilly-Lou?"

"Jes' makin' sure he gets off our property, Grandpa. Don't worry." To Creel she confided in a lower voice, "Grandpa's gettin' old. Ain't playin' with a full deck these days."

He glanced sideways at her. "Think you could talk him into selling?"

"Don't need to. Place's in my name, bought with my money. I was the whatchamacallit on Pa's policy."

"The beneficiary?" he hazarded.

"That's it. What you said."

They reached the car and halted to look each other over. He was reasonably certain that her sudden affability meant she was willing to bargain. It was even possible that she had been willing to bargain all along, from the moment he brought up the subject of buying the swamp, and had been driving the price up in her own backwoods way. There was a certain primitive shrewdness in her, he was beginning to realize, but no great intelligence and no imagination at all. He doubted that it would occur to her that her two prospective buyers might want the place for some reason other than their stated purpose. She struck him as naive enough, despite her native shrewdness, to accept at face value that he and the "Ayraab" were both merely philanthro-

pically interested in establishing a bird sanctuary. Probably it would be beyond her comprehension that such an apparently useless stretch of swamp could be worth millions. No doubt she was convinced that she was taking unconscionable advantage of a couple of nuts.

"Will you take two hundred thousand?" he asked.

"I'll see what that Ayrab says first. He's coming back tomorrow."

"Why don't we settle it today?" he suggested. "How much will you take?"

"Quarter of a million."

The blond man blinked. But he didn't hesitate. "Okay. It just happens that my lawyer is over at the house right now. I'll have him draw up a sales contract right now for both of us to sign. I'll need your name."

"Jill Munroe."

"M-u-n-r-o-e?" he asked, spelling it.

The girl nodded.

Creel climbed into the Mercedes. "Don't go away. I'll be back shortly."

"Don't forget to bring the money."

"It's going to take a couple of days to raise that," he said. "But we can sign the agreement. That will stipulate when the check is to be delivered."

She shook her head. "Don't trust checks. Has to be cash."

"Cash!" he said. "Nobody pays an amount like a quarter of a million in cash."

"That Ayrab offered cash," she said reasonably. "Maybe he'll meet your price."

"No, don't worry," he said hurriedly. "I'll get the cash. But I doubt that I can get it together before the day after tomorrow."

The girl shrugged. "I ain't the one in a hurry. Seems to me you are. Day after tomorrow's fine with me."

"Then suppose you come over to the LeMaire mansion about four Friday afternoon?" he suggested.

"Bring along the deed and we'll get everything settled at once. You know where the mansion is?"

She nodded. "Course. Everybody knows that."

"Meantime, I'll have my lawyer draw up a simple agreement form for both of us to sign right now, so neither of us can back out."

"Munroes don't back out, once they give their word," she said. "I'll sign when I see the money."

That upset him, but he could tell from her definite tone and her set expression that argument wasn't going to move her. "Maybe I can raise the money by tomorrow afternoon" he said, "Yes, I'm sure I can. Come up to the mansion about four P.M. tomorrow, instead of waiting until Friday."

"All right," she said agreeably.

"Meantime, can I depend on your word?"

She raised her right hand. "Once a Munroe says it, a promise is kept, come hell or high water. You want to make it a bindin' deal?"

"Yes, I do," he said fervently.

Shifting the rifle to her left hand, she thrust out her right. "Then shake on it. I agree to sell you my forty acres of swamp for one-quarter of a million dollars. You agree to buy for that sum?"

Clasping the hand, he said sincerely, "I do."

Releasing his hand, she said, "In my family that's a bindin' deal. Wouldn't sell to that Ayraab now, even for a million. Won't even talk to him. I'll jes' run him off with my gun when he comes back."

"That's the spirit," Creel said, relieved. "See you tomorrow at four P.M."

"Hope you got the same respect for a handshake."

"Oh, I do," the blond man assured her. "In my family a handshake is just as binding as a notarized signature."

"Well, you ain't all bad after all, I guess," the girl said. "Hear Mr. Hawkins tell it, you was a no-good snake."

"He was a little prejudiced," Creel told her.

Giving her a final smile, and remembering to show his teeth, he drove off.

Eighteen

Back at the mansion Beau Creel's story of what had happened was received with mixed emotions. There was joy that apparently they were going to be able to acquire deed to the property before the international cartel dealing with Janet LeMaire discovered she wasn't going to inherit it, but dismay at the amount of cash it was going to require to close the deal.

In a reproachful voice Rachel said to Creel, "And to think that only three days ago you could have picked it up for ten thousand."

"Three days ago none of us had any idea of its value," Creel said irritably. "What the hell is a quarter of a million against twenty or maybe forty million, or maybe even more?"

"A lot, at this moment," Henry Bancroft said. "I can raise about half that if I strip my bank accounts and sell off all the stocks and bonds I own."

Creel gave Rachel an inquiring look.

"I could raise the other half about the same way," she admitted. She looked at Kelly. "What's going to be your contribution?"

Kelly gave her a sunny smile. "I have forty-three dollars. My contribution was putting you people next to this. You wouldn't be dealing for the property if I hadn't come along."

Getting to his feet, Bancroft said, "Let's not squabble. First thing we have to do is make sure this Jill Munroe actually owns the property. Beau, why don't you send Rick Wilder over to the county courthouse to check that out?" He glanced at his

watch. "Meantime Rachel and I will get to the bank to start converting our assets. We have just about time to make it before the banks close, if we hurry."

Creel had brought the lawyer home to lunch in his car. Tossing him the keys, he said, "Better take the Mercedes instead of Rachel's car, because it's already out. You're going to be cutting it pretty close."

"I know," Bancroft said. "Come on, Rachel."

They hurried out. Creel left Kelly alone in the living room and went out the back way, presumably to get Rick Wilder. Deciding this would be a good time to make a report to Scott Woodville, Kelly went upstairs to her room.

Sitting on the bed, she said into the CB radio, "Woodville? Come in, Woodville."

After a moment a familiar voice said, "Yes, Kelly?"

"Rachel LeMaire and Henry Bancroft just left for the bank to convert all their liquid assets into cash. Thought you'd like to know."

"Things seem to be working as planned," Woodville said in a pleased voice. "I just heard from Jill that she sold Creel. Apparently he sold the others."

"Yes," Kelly said. "Only thing is, Creel's going to send one of his goons over to the courthouse to check ownership of the swamp property. Any problem there?"

"None. All he'll find is that it's in the name of Jill Munroe, free and clear."

"Good. When's our next move?"

"Tomorrow night. We'll give them a chance to pay the money before we make it. Don't want to inflict too many problems on them at the same time."

"You'll be dropping by tomorrow night, then?" Kelly asked.

"Uh-huh. See you then."

She switched off the radio, retracted the antenna, and put the radio back into the pocket of her leather jacket in the closet.

Out back Beau Creel was knocking on the door of

the apartment over the garage. Rick Wilder answered.

"I want you to run over to the courthouse," Creel told the freckled man. "Check out the ownership of that swampland we sold to Cedric Hawkins, and see if it's currently owned by a woman named Jill Munroe. That's spelled with a U. M-u-n-r-o-e."

"Okay," Wilder said.

"Then I want you to poke around in town to see what you can pick up about her."

"About this Munroe dame?"

Creel nodded. "And her old grandpa, who lives with her."

"Lives with her where?"

"In that shack Hawkins built," Creel said impatiently. "I just told you she bought it from Hawkins."

"Oh. What sort of things you want to know about her?"

"Anything. Where she and her grandpa are from, how they found out about the swamp being for sale, whatever you can."

The freckled man seemed a little puzzled by these instructions, but he said, "Okay, I'll do the best I can."

He descended the outside stairway with Creel, climbed into the pickup truck parked near the bottom of it, and took off.

It was nearly six P.M. when Rachel and Henry Bancroft got back from town. Creel and Kelly were in the game room when they arrived, playing eight-ball pool. Creel finished a shot before straightening and looking at them inquiringly.

"The bank will have the money for us by noon tomorrow," Bancroft said. "Did you have Rick check out the property?"

"Uh-huh, but he's not back yet."

Rachel said, "I have to start dinner. I've invited Henry to stay."

"Go ahead," Creel told her.

Rachel left the room. Bancroft went over to the bar

to mix himself a drink. The eight-ball game resumed.

They heard the front door open and close, then Rick Wilder came into the room. Kelly, who was tiring of the pool game, picked that moment to end it with apparent accident, but actually deliberately, by sinking the eight ball.

"Tough luck," Creel said without sympathy. "I was going to run the rest of my stripes soon as you missed that shot anyway, though."

Both of them racked their cues. Creel looked at Wilder.

"She owns it, all right," the freckled man said. "Transfer was just made. No liens against it."

"Pick up anything about her and her grandpa?" Creel asked.

Wilder shook his head. "Got something on Hawkins and his wife, though. You know old man Stubeck at the railway station?"

"Never heard of him."

Wilder looked surprised. "Passenger agent. Been there for thirty years. Knows everybody in the county."

"Maybe he knows everybody else," Creel said, "but I still never heard of him. What about him?"

"He said old Hawkins and his wife caught a train for Phoenix. Hawkins showed him a certified check for twenty-two thousand, five hundred dollars. Said he'd sold his place to some fool woman who *liked* swampland."

Creel grunted. "Is that all you came up with?"

"Nothing else to come up with," Wilder said defensively. "Nobody in town ever heard of Jill Munroe or her old grandpa."

"Okay," Creel said. "That's all for now, Rick."

The freckled man left the room. Creel went over to the bar to make himself a before-dinner cocktail. He threw Kelly an inquiring look.

Shaking her head, she said, "No, thanks."

Creel began to mix himself a vodka martini.

Bancroft said, "Beau, you think they'll drain that swamp before they start drilling for oil?"

Creel paused in the act of pouring his martini from the cocktail mixer into a glass in order to consider this. "Might," he said reflectively after a time. He resumed pouring. "On the other hand, they don't drain the ocean for offshore drilling."

"The swamp will be a little easier," Bancroft said dryly. "Suppose they do?"

Creel opened an olive jar, speared an olive with a toothpick, and dropped it into his drink. "It's something to think about."

"Then we'd better think about it."

With a glance at Kelly, Creel said, "We'll talk about it later, Henry."

Late that night Kelly contacted Woodville by radio again.

"Creel and Brancroft are wondering if the drillers will drain the swamp," she told him.

"Oh? Did they indicate why they were concerned?"

"No. Creel cut off the discussion in front of me. Said they'd talk about it later, meaning in private. But I'm a smart girl, Woodville. My guess is there's something in the swamp they don't want the developers to find."

"Seems likely," Woodville agreed. "That's been our basic premise right along. I'll light a fire under them tomorrow by letting them know the swamp will be drained."

"Okay, Woodville," Kelly said. "Sweet dreams."

"Only kind I ever have," he told her virtuously. "Comes from a clear conscience."

At four P.M. the next day Rachel, Kelly, Bancroft, and Creel were all waiting in the front room for Jill to arrive. In a neat pile on the Louis XIV table were twenty-five banded sheaves of one-hundred-dollar bills, with one hundred bills in each sheaf.

When it got to be ten after four, everyone except Kelly began to get nervous.

"Think that Arab got to her?" Rachel inquired fearfully.

"We shook hands," Creel said. "Those swamp people have a code of honor. To them a handshake is like swearing on the Bible."

His tone wasn't as assured as his words, though.

At a quarter after four the door chimes sounded. Everyone looked relieved as Rachel hurried to answer the door. Creel and Bancroft looked even more relieved when she returned with Jill in tow.

The girl's blond hair fell about her shoulders in the same careless but appealing disarray as yesterday, Creel noted, and she wore the same red-and-white-checked gingham dress. But at least she had shoes on today. In one hand she carried a large plastic grocery bag with rope handles.

"Hi," she said generally, her gaze fixed on the stack of currency.

"Afternoon, Miss Munroe," Creel said. He introduced her to the others, then asked, "You bring the deed?"

"Right here," Jill said, patting the pocket of her dress. "That little stack there come to a quarter million?"

"It's all in hundreds," Bancroft said. "Do you want to count it?"

"It all there?"

"It's all there," the lawyer assured her.

"Well, you look like an honest man," she said. "Guess I'll trust you."

Going over to the table, she started dropping the banded sheaves into her shopping bag. Bancroft, who was standing on the opposite side of the table, held up a protesting palm.

"Just a moment, Miss Munroe. There is something to sign first."

"Oh, sure," Jill said, setting the partially filled shopping bag on the floor. "Guess I got carried away."

Bancroft spread a sheet of legal-sized paper on the table before her. "This is a simple bill of sale, Miss

Munroe," he explained. "It merely acknowledges that you are transferring title to your property to the listed four buyers in return for the sum of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, and acknowledges receipt of the money in cash." Handing her a pen, he pointed to a line and said, "Sign here."

After briefly scanning the form, she accepted the pen and laboriously scrawled her signature. Then, picking up her shopping bag, she looked at him inquiringly and asked, "Now?"

"Now," he agreed.

She transferred the rest of the money to the bag.

"Won't Grandpa be happy to see all this money?" she said sunnily, starting for the door.

"The deed, please," Creel said.

Coming to a stop, Jill said, "Of course. Guess I jes' got no head for business." She fished a paper from her pocket and handed it to Creel, who in turn handed it to Bancroft.

After examining it, the lawyer entered the transfer data, laid it on the table, and said, "I need your signature once more, Miss Munroe."

Returning, Jill signed where the lawyer indicated. Handing him back his pen, she asked, "That it?"

"That's it," Bancroft said.

His eyes on the shopping bag, Creel asked, "Want a lift back to the cabin, Miss Munroe?"

"Ain't goin' back to the cabin," she said. "Meetin' Grandpa at the railroad station. We're goin' back to Louisiana to buy us a really *big* piece of swamp."

A slight glitter appeared in Beau Creel's eyes. "Can I give you a lift to the railroad station, then?"

"Ain't necessary. Got transportation outside. Deputy sheriff ran me over in a patrol car."

Creel looked at her blankly.

"They'll do that for anybody who's got money to transport, you know," Jill said cheerily. "All you got to do is call 'em."

Walking over to the archway into the entry hall, she turned, threw then all a sunny smile, and

said, "Well, good-bye. Have fun in your bird sanctuary."

She continued on out. They heard the front door open and close again.

Emitting a long sigh, Henry Bancroft said, "Well, there goes every penny we had in the world."

Shrugging, Creel said, "Think of a hundred times that much, Henry."

Nineteen

Friday morning Scott Woodville got to the county courthouse ten minutes before its offices opened at nine o'clock. The building itself was already open, so he stood before a window at the end of a hall that overlooked the public parking lot to the right of the courthouse.

He had figured that it would be Henry Bancroft who would come to record the deed, and he was right. He had also figured that no time would be wasted in recording it, and he was right about that, too. He saw the lawyer get out of a car in the parking lot at five minutes after nine.

He retreated along the hallway to a door with a block-letter sign over it reading RECORDER OF DEEDS AND PROPERTIES. He lingered before the door until he saw Henry Bancroft round a corner and move toward him. Then he opened the door and went in.

He was at the counter when the lawyer came in behind him. When a middle-aged female clerk asked if she could help him, Woodville said, "I would like to look at the plat of the Samarra Vineyards."

"One moment," the woman said, and disappeared into another room.

Bancroft said, "May I ask what your interest is in the Samarra Vineyards, sir?"

Woodville turned to regard him. "May I ask what your interest is in my interest?" he countered.

"I happen to be the attorney for the vineyards."

Woodville put a surprise expression on his face. "Henry Bancroft?"

"Yes."

Smiling, Woodville extended his hand. "I represent Janet LeMaire. She has a high regard for you. I'm Scott Woodville."

"Oh, yes, I've heard of you, too," Bancroft said, clasping the proffered hand.

The female clerk reappeared carrying a heavy and thick book of maps about two and a half feet square. Setting it on the counter, she opened it to a map she had marked by inserting a small card.

As Woodville began to examine the map, Bancroft asked, "What are you looking for?"

"Just checking the extent of the property my client is about to inherit." Then he frowned. Pointing to a spot in the lower right-hand corner of the map, he said, "Miss, this section here has a different deed number."

The woman peered, read off the number aloud in order to affix it in her memory, then went over to a bank of file cabinets. She took out a thick loose-leaf book about a foot square and brought it over to the counter. Flipping pages, she stopped halfway through.

"That property is owned by a Miss Jill Munroe," she said.

"Not any more," Bancroft put in. "You may leave that book out, because I'm here to record new ownership." He laid some papers on the counter.

"Just a minute," Woodville said in a slightly high voice. "That section of property is part of the estate my client is due to inherit."

Bancroft smiled at him. "No, it was sold to a man

named Hawkins about six months ago. He in turn recently sold it to Miss Jill Munroe, and my associates and I just purchased it from Miss Munroe."

"Now, wait a minute!" Woodville said ominously. "No one had authority to sell any of my client's property."

"It wasn't—and, until Saturday, still isn't—your client's property, Counselor. Samarra is incorporated. No individual sold the property. The corporation sold a piece of property *belonging to the corporation*. I'm sure you're aware that a corporate transaction of that sort is perfectly legal."

Woodville looked stunned. For a long period he did nothing but gaze at Bancroft rather wildly. Then he said in a croaking voice, "We must discuss this, Counselor. Can we—can we go somewhere?"

"My office is only a few blocks from here," Bancroft said pleasantly. "I'll be with you as soon as I have the new ownership of the property recorded."

Woodville waited while the man took care of his business, then followed him out to the parking lot.

"Do you have a car?" Bancroft asked.

Woodville pointed to the rented Chevrolet he was driving.

"That's mine," Bancroft said, pointing to the year-old Dodge Woodville had watched him get out of from inside. "You can follow me to my office."

Ten minutes later they entered the law office together. Telling his secretary to hold all calls, Bancroft escorted Woodville into his private office and invited him to sit. The lawyer seated himself in the swivel chair behind his desk, put the tips of his fingers together, and gave his visitor the kind of a smile a poker player gives when he holds all the aces.

Woodville asked, "Why did you and your associates buy this piece of swampland, Counselor? You must know it's worthless."

"Why are you so concerned about it, then?"

Woodville said earnestly, "As my client explained, she wants to convert it into a bird sanctuary. I thought it was agreed that she would retain those

forty acres when she deeded over Samarra to Mrs. LeMaire."

"Mrs. LeMaire didn't own the forty acres."

Woodville made a dismissing gesture. "That's all water under the bridge. I'm sure my client would be willing to pay a reasonable sum for the return of the property. She's quite enthusiastic about establishing her bird sanctuary."

"All right," Bancroft said agreeably. "How about forty million dollars?"

The balding man blinked. "What?"

"Let's stop playing games, Counselor. We both know what's under that swamp. Oil."

Woodville blinked again.

Bancroft said, "We both also know that an international cartel, headed by XO Oil Corporation, is after it, and has made an offer of twenty million."

After staring at him for a long time, Woodville said huskily, "Then what made you ask forty million from my client?"

"Because somebody else your client doesn't know about is also after it. An Iranian oil company."

"They've offered forty million?" Woodville asked in a surprised tone.

"They haven't actually offered anything yet. That forty million figure is merely an estimate of what they might bid, made by the man at XO representing the cartel."

"Charlie?" Woodville asked.

"Oh, you know him?"

Woodville shook his head. "That's just a code name. I've spoken to him on the phone, but I don't know his real name. All I know is he's a top executive at XO Oil and insists on remaining anonymous."

There was a lengthy silence as both men regarded each other contemplatively. Finally, after clearing his throat, Woodville said, "I might be able to be of service to you and your associates by putting you in touch with Charlie."

"I thought you might," Bancroft said complacently. "That's the reason I agreed to this conference."

In a cautious voice Woodville said, "Of course my primary duty is to my client."

"Of course," Bancroft said dryly.

"Obviously there is nothing I can do for her in this situation, but it still might be construed as a conflict of interest if it became known that I was dealing with you and your associates after you squeezed my client out."

Bancroft nodded. "So you would want your fee from us under the table."

"I wouldn't put it that bluntly," Woodville said quickly.

"Why not, Counselor?" Bancroft asked with a slight smile. "It is what you want, isn't it?"

Woodville turned both hands palm up. "A man has to look out for his own interests as well as those of his clients."

"Of course," Bancroft said with understanding. "When can you put us in touch with Charlie?"

"I'll try to reach him this morning. Will you be here all morning?"

Nodding, the lawyer took a business card from a small box on top of his desk and handed it to Woodville. "My phone number's on the card."

Pocketing the card, Woodville got to his feet. "I'll phone you as soon as I get in touch with Charlie."

"You might let him know that we're aware of the Iranians' interest, Woodville. It could hike his offer."

"I planned on that" Woodville assured him. "Incidentally, about my fee—"

"Yes?"

"The cartel has already offered twenty million. Would a fair fee for me be one percent of whatever I get them to go above that?"

After considering, Bancroft said, "If you hiked them to forty million, you'd earn two hundred thousand."

"Wouldn't that be worth it?"

"I think so," Bancroft said, nodding. "I'm sure my associates will go along with that."

"Then expect to hear from me shortly," Woodville said, smiling his way out.

A half hour later Henry Bancroft received a phone call from Woodville.

"Charlie's unavailable until eight o'clock this evening," the caller announced. "He'll call me then, but I thought you might like to listen in on the conversation. I'm to call his secretary back to let her know what number to call. Shall I make it your office?"

"I'm invited to dinner at the LeMaire mansion tonight," Bancroft said. After thinking a moment, he added, "All my associates in this will be there and they'll be equally interested in what's said. I'm sure Mrs. LeMaire would have no objection to your coming to dinner, too. Why don't you just have the call returned to the mansion?"

"If you think it will be all right with Mrs. LeMaire."

"I'm sure it will be, but let me call her and phone you back."

Woodville gave him the phone number of his motel room. A few minutes later Bancroft called back to confirm that the invitation stood, and to tell him that he should be at the mansion at six-thirty.

"There is a slight problem, though," the lawyer said. "Janet has moved in. She had to move in today in order to qualify under the will, you know."

"Yes, I do know," Woodville said ruefully. "Will she be there for dinner?"

"Rachel thinks not. She had to invite her, of course, but Janet was a little vague about her plans."

"It would be a little awkward if she were there when the phone call came from Charlie," Woodville said. "Is she at the mansion now?"

"She was when I talked to Rachel just moments ago."

"I'll phone on the excuse of asking her to dinner tonight, and find out her plans. If she isn't planning to go out this evening, we'll have to change our plans anyway, so I may as well take her to dinner."

"All right," Bancroft said. "You'll phone me back?"

"In a few minutes."

When Woodville hung up, he dialed the mansion. Rachel answered the phone. He asked to speak to Janet LeMaire.

When Sabrina's voice said, "Yes?" Woodville asked, "Anyone listening?"

"From a distance."

"You mean she can hear you, but not me?"

"Yes."

"Okay. I understand Rachel has invited you to dinner tonight."

"Yes."

"Say this: 'I'm sorry, but I have a dinner engagement in town.'"

"I'm sorry, but I have a dinner engagement in town," Sabrina repeated.

"Fine," Woodville said. "After you hang up, tell Rachel you won't be able to accept her kind invitation. I want you out of the house this evening."

"You're always so kind," she said. "It's nice to feel wanted."

Woodville hung up and phoned Bancroft back.

"She has a dinner engagement this evening," he told the lawyer. "From what she said, I gather she'll be out all evening."

"Fine," Bancroft said. "Then we'll expect you at the mansion at six-thirty."

Twenty

Since Scott Woodville had already met Beau Creel and Rachel LeMaire, the only person he had to be introduced to when he arrived at the mansion was Kelly. Both pretended they had never seen each other before.

It was a pleasant meal, with Rachel, Creel, and Bancroft all keyed to a high pitch over the prospect of the enormous wealth due to befall them, and with Kelly and Woodville pretending equal enthusiasm. After dinner everyone repaired to the game room, where they sat around staring at the phone, waiting for it to ring.

It rang promptly at eight P.M. Woodville was seated at the bar, where he could get at it easily. When it started to ring, Beau Creel and Henry Bancroft both hurried from the room. They were heading for the kitchen to listen in on the extension there, Woodville knew. He let the phone ring three times before answering in order to give them time to get there. As he finally picked it up, Rachel took the stool to his right and Kelly the one to his left, and both bent their heads toward him to listen, too.

"Woodville here," he said.

"How are you, Counselor?" a familiar voice said in his ear. "My secretary says you have an urgent message."

"We have a problem, Charlie," Woodville said. "It develops that Janet LeMaire isn't going to inherit the property."

"She's not going to inherit Samarra?" Charlie said in a surprised voice.

"Oh, she's going to inherit Samarra all right. But the vineyards happen to be incorporated."

"So?"

"About six months ago the corporation sold the particular section you're intersted in. It's no longer part of Samarra."

After a period of silence Charlie exploded, "Judas Priest! Why did it take you six months to find that out? What kind of a lawyer are you?"

"It was a very quiet transaction," Woodville said defensively. "I only heard of it today. My client hasn't even been informed yet."

"Any way the sale can be invalidated?"

"None. A corporation has the legal right to dispose of property owned by it. The property has changed hands twice since, incidentally. It is presently owned by a group of people."

"Who, I suppose, are fully aware of its value," Charlie said sourly.

"Yes."

There was another short silence. Then Charlie asked, "Are you now representing the new group, Counselor?"

Woodville said carefully, "That might be construed as a conflict of interest, Charlie, although it really wouldn't be because my client no longer has any claim to the property. However, I feel an obligation to speak to you on their behalf—without accepting any legal fee, of course—simply so as not to leave you out on a limb. I feel, after all, that since I erroneously informed you that my client was in a position to grant you development rights to the property, it is only fair that I assist you in dealing with the real owners."

"Cut the legalese, Counselor," Charlie said in a bored tone. "Are you authorized to speak for the owners?"

"Yes."

"That's more like it. The same offer holds. Twenty million."

"I'm afraid there's a complication there, too,

Charlie," Woodville said regretfully. "They know that group from Iran is after it, too."

"Judas Priest!" Charlie again exploded. "Have the Arabs made an offer?"

"I don't believe so. But you know they'll go higher than twenty million when they do."

"How much do your people want?" Charlie growled.

"Forty million."

"Forty million!" Charlie repeated on a high note. "Out of the question."

"Well, then I'll advise them to see what the Iranians have to offer."

"Do they want Arab interests to take over the United States oil industry?" Charlie demanded. "Don't they have any patriotism?"

"Oh, they're all patriots," Woodville said. "But they would also like to be millionaires. It's so much easier to be patriotic when you are. It's been pleasant talking to you, Charlie."

"All right, you Yankee horse trader," Charlie said wearily. "Forty million. But I want signatures on a binding agreement tonight. If you can call me back within an hour and assure me you have signed contracts, we'll go ahead. Otherwise forget it."

"They're all here with me," Woodville said. "And I have a copy of the contract you made up for my client to sign out in the car. I'll have it retyped for their signatures and will call you back within a half hour."

"Okay, do it," Charlie said, and hung up.

As Woodville hung up the phone, Rachel gazed at him starry-eyed and said in an ecstatic voice, "Forty million dollars!"

Creel and Bancroft rushed into the room. Creel gave Woodville an enthusiastic slap on the back. "You old Yankee horse trader!" he said. "You really made him come across!"

The more conservative Henry Bancroft merely shook Woodville's hand. Kelly, deciding it would look odd if she failed to show some elation, too, startled

the bald man by throwing her arms about his neck and giving him a kiss on the cheek.

Untangling himself from the girl, Woodville said, "I'll get that contract from the car. Is there a typewriter around here?"

"I have one," Rachel said happily. "And I type ninety words a minute. I was my husband's secretary before we married, you know."

Woodville went out to his car to get the contract. Bancroft read it over carefully before allowing Rachel to retype it, but the only change he made was to raise the figure of twenty million dollars to forty million. After Rachel had typed it, in triplicate, Woodville had all four of them sign each copy. Folding the three copies, he stuck them in his inside breast pocket.

"I'll get these in the mail first thing in the morning," he said. "Charlie should get them Monday, and your two copies with his signature on them should be back here by Wednesday."

They were all so euphoric about their expected riches that it didn't occur to anyone, including the lawyer, that so far the only signatures on anything were theirs.

Woodville phoned Charlie back at eight-thirty. When he got him on the phone, he said, "All set. The contract is all signed, and should be on your desk by Monday."

"Good," Charlie said in a pleased voice. "Then we'll start dredging on Monday."

"Can you get the equipment here that fast?"

"Don't worry about my end, Counselor. I'm looking at some of the equipment right now. And it is, believe me, ready to move."

The equipment Charlie was looking at was not the kind he implied. It was appended to the gorgeous blonde attendant who served cold drinks, among other things. At the moment she was mixing a tall, cold drink at a portable bar just outside the striped canvas tennis cabana where Charlie was

seated in a canvas lounge chair. Both of them were in tennis shorts.

As Charlie hung up, the blonde said over her shoulder, "You think the girls can handle it, Charlie?"

"They're very good at what they do."

"Don't you ever worry about them?"

"Constantly," Charlie said. "But this is the way they wanted it. To prove they could do it on their own. It's the times we live in, I suppose. Something to do with the long haul from Miss to Ms."

The girl carried the drink over and handed it to him.

"Bless you, my dear," Charlie said.

At the mansion Creel and Bancroft had again listened in on the kitchen extension, and Rachel and Kelly had bracketed Woodville at the bar. Everyone knew what had been said, therefore.

When Creel and the lawyer returned to the front room, Creel said, "They're going to start draining that swamp on Monday?"

"That's what the man said," Woodville confirmed cheerfully. He turned to Rachel. "I'd better be running along. It was a wonderful dinner. Thanks so much for inviting me."

"You're more than welcome," she said with sincerity. "I could never repay you for all you did for us tonight."

Turning to Kelly, Woodville said, "It was nice to meet you, too, Miss Garrett." He gave her a formal bow.

"My pleasure," Kelly said, successfully refraining from giggling.

When Woodville had left, Kelly clasped her hands together and said, "Signed, sealed, and delivered! We're in business!"

"Looks like," Beau Creel agreed.

Henry Bancroft said, "Rachel, don't forget you and I have to be in court tomorrow."

Creel looked at him. "With forty million staring us in the face, you're going to worry about Samarra?"

"We have to show up," the lawyer said. "I would be in trouble with the court if I just failed to appear. Anyway, why throw away something like Samarra just because we've got forty million dollars?"

"I'll be there, Henry," Rachel said. "What time is it scheduled?"

"Nine A.M."

"We have a little more important business to discuss than that tonight," Creel growled. "They're going to start draining that swamp Monday."

Bancroft threw a cautioning look at Kelly.

Taking the hint, Kelly said, "All the excitement has got me fagged. I hate to leave such nice company, but I'm going to bed."

"Go ahead," Creel told her. "The business I mentioned doesn't have anything to do with our oil deal."

"Well, see you tomorrow, partners," Kelly said affably, and went on upstairs.

Twenty-One

Outside, before driving away, Scott Woodville took the CB radio from the glove compartment of his rented Chevrolet. Then he changed his mind and put it back again. He had rented a car with a phone in it, and he decided to use that because he could drive while using it. Lifting the phone from its bracket, he called Sabrina's hotel suite.

Jill answered the phone with a prim, "Miss LeMaire's suite."

"Woodville," he said. "Sabrina there, too?"

"Yes," Jill said in her normal voice. "We're playing gin. How'd things go?"

"Fine. Tell Sabrina it's all clear to return to the mansion. I'm on my way back to my motel."

"I take it the call came from Charlie?"

"Uh-huh. As planned, I talked him into doubling his original offer. That put them so high on cloud nine, they haven't realized they're the only ones who signed anything."

"You think Charlie's conscience ever bothers him?" Jill asked.

"No."

"Any particular instructions?"

"Yes. Both you and Sabrina are to stand by for contact at instant notice. They think equipment is going to arrive Monday morning to start draining the swamp."

"Suppose they move tonight?"

"My guess is tomorrow, but anything's possible. That's why I want all three of you standing by."

"We'll keep our switches open," Jill promised. "Good night, Woodville."

"I'll just say *au revoir*," Woodville said. "It may not be good night."

Back at the mansion Kelly noisily closed her bedroom door, then eased it open again and slipped back out into the upper hall. After listening for a moment, she descended the stairs on tiptoe, stepping past the two steps she had noticed creaked. At the bottom of the stairs she silently slipped over next to the archway leading into the game room.

She heard the crack of racked pool balls being broken, then Rachel's voice said, "Why don't you ask Henry to play, Beau, instead of just practicing by yourself?"

"I don't care about playing," the lawyer's voice said.

There was the sound of the cue ball striking another ball. Then Creel said irritably, "Get away from that bar."

"You don't have to talk to me like that," Rachel said in a hurt voice.

"I won't, if you get away from the bar."

For some minutes the only sound was the click of pool balls. Then Rachel said, "I wish you didn't have to go out there tonight."

They had already discussed the matter during the short period she was gone and had decided to move tonight, Kelly realized when Creel inquired, "You want them to dredge the swamp and find the old man?"

"Do you have to wait until so late?" Bancroft's voice asked. "Remember I have to be in court tomorrow."

"We want to be sure Kelly and Janet are both sound asleep," Creel said. "I hope Janet comes in soon, because we're going to have to wait a full hour after she's in her room."

"That's a pleasant thought," the lawyer said. "Suppose she comes in at midnight?"

"Then we'll leave at one A.M."

Again there was silence except for the click of pool balls. Then Bancroft asked, "What about Kelly, incidentally? Are we really going to turn over twenty million to her?"

"One thing at a time," Creel said.

"I'm not going to wait up until you leave," Rachel suddenly announced. "I'm going to bed."

Before Kelly could react, Rachel walked through the archway and right past her. Kelly tried to press herself into the wall. Fortunately Rachel didn't glance her way, but when she turned left to start up the stairs, she could have seen the girl standing there rigidly simply by slightly turning her head, because Kelly was in clear view only a few feet to the left of the open banister. Apparently still smarting from Creel's bluntness in front of Bancroft, Rachel kept her gaze fixed straight ahead, though.

Releasing her held breath when Rachel disappeared from sight at the top of the stairs, Kelly tiptoed back upstairs, again remembering to step over the two creaky treads. Safely back in her room, she took another deep breath and released it.

Kelly knew there was no point in trying to raise Woodville on the radio for a time, because he wouldn't have reached his motel yet, and he wouldn't have the radio receiver switched on in the car. She sat and waited.

About the time she figured Woodville would be arriving at his motel, she heard Sabrina come in. Rachel had assigned "Janet" the room adjoining Kelly's, and the two rooms had a connecting bath. Kelly went through the bathroom into the other room, to find Sabrina just hanging up the light jacket she had worn.

"Hi," Sabrina said in a low voice. "Woodville briefed Jill by phone on what happened, and Jill told me."

"Something else has happened since," Kelly said in an equally low voice. "They're going body snatching tonight. I was just getting ready to radio Woodville."

"Be my guest," Sabrina said, taking her CB radio from her purse on the dresser and handing it to Kelly.

Extending the antenna, Kelly switched on the instrument and said, "Woodville?"

"Here," Woodville's voice said promptly. "What's up?"

"It's tonight, Woodville. They'll be leaving in about an hour."

"Well, things are moving," Woodville said. "Sabrina there yet?"

"Just came in. That's how I know it will be another hour. I listened in on their plans, and they intended to wait a full hour after 'Janet' got home, figuring by then she'd be asleep. They think I'm already asleep. I'm calling from Sabrina's room."

"Okay," Woodville's voice said. "I'll contact Jill. The two of you dress appropriately and meet us at the southeast corner of the swamp."

"Roger," Kelly said, and switched off.

The girls knew what dressing "appropriately" meant. Both put on dark blue lightweight slacks, dark

blue turtleneck sweaters, and black sneakers. Then, turning out the lights in both rooms, they watched from Kelly's window for the departure of the body snatchers.

Apparently Beau Creel had previously been back to the apartment above the garage to issue instructions to his henchmen, because they saw the door at the top of the outdoor stairway open and both Rick Wilder and Abel Hicks emerge. The pair descended the stairway, and Wilder rolled the garage door upward.

It was a dark, moonless night, but because Wilder turned on the garage light, the girls could clearly see what the men were doing. The swarthy Hicks carried some scuba-diving equipment out to the pickup truck parked at the foot of the outdoor stairway and put it in the back. As nearly as the girls could make out, there was a wet suit, an aqualung, flippers, a pair of goggles, and an underwater lamp. The freckled Rick Wilder carried a spade and what looked from that distance like some wire clippers from the garage and tossed them in the back of the truck.

Wilder turned off the garage light and rolled down the garage door, and the two men climbed the stairs again to disappear into their quarters.

"Advance preparations," Sabrina said.

"Probably they were Boy Scouts," Kelly said. "Be prepared."

It was then about ten P.M. Shortly before eleven Beau Creel and Henry Bancroft emerged from the back door, both wearing dark zippered jackets. Presumably the lawyer's had been loaned him by Creel, since earlier he had been wearing a business suit.

Creel was carrying a rifle. The girls drew back from the window when both men glanced upward, first looking at Sabrina's window, then at the one from which the girls were watching.

A moment later they ventured to look out again when Creel emitted a low whistle. They were just in time to see the door at the top of the outdoor stairs open and Wilder and Hicks descend. Creel and Ban-

croft got into the cab of the truck, Creel behind the wheel. He switched on the headlights just as Wilder and Hicks climbed into the back. Both men were also wearing dark jackets. The freckled Wilder's hung open, and in the reflected glow of the headlights the girls caught the glint of something metallic thrust into his belt.

"I think the redheaded goon's carrying a gun," Sabrainna said.

"Or a knife," Kelly said. "It's hard to tell in the dark."

The pickup truck backed up, turned, and drove off.

"Here we go," Kelly said, and headed for the door.

They went down the stairs silently so as not to awaken the sleeping Rachel, Kelly indicating the two creaky steps when they reached them. They took Sabrainna's rented Lincoln instead of the motorcycle, because they figured its engine would make less noise. Sabrainna drove away slowly, so as to keep the noise at a minimum.

Woodville's rented Chevrolet was already parked on the shoulder when they reached the road intersection at the southeast corner of the swamp. It was parked a few yards west of the intersection, on the swamp side of the road, on the road running just south of both the swamp and the Samarra Vineyards. Sabrainna pulled in behind the Chevrolet and cut the engine and lights. Both girls got out, carrying their little CB radios.

Woodville and Jill got out of the other car. They too were dressed in dark clothing and carried CB radios. In addition, Woodville wore a cloth cap, presumably to hide the shine of his bald pate.

"Where's Bosley?" Jelly asked in a low voice.

"I sent him back to Los Angeles with the money," Woodville said. "Had they left yet when you did?"

"Just before us," Sabrainna said. "Bancroft, Creel, and Creel's two goon boys. They brought along scuba-diving equipment and a shovel."

"Sounds promising," Woodville said.

Kelly said, "Creel also brought a rifle, and I think the redheaded goon is carrying a pistol."

"That's less promising," Woodville said dubiously.

All four of them glanced around in all directions. Myriad night sounds came from the swamp—the croaking of frogs, the splash of leaping fish, the hum of insects—but outside of the swamp there was dead silence. The two roads that intersected here were seldom traveled even in the daytime, and at this time of night were absolutely deserted. The girls all shivered a little at the dark and eerie silence.

Woodville said, "Kelly, station yourself somewhere along the east edge of the swamp, about halfway between here and the north edge." He pointed in the general direction of where he wanted her to go. "Sabrina, you take the west edge." Again he pointed, this time in the opposite direction. "Jill, you work around to the north side. But be careful. I figure they'll start from there, because there's a row-boat beached near the cabin. Don't let them spot you."

"I'll be careful," Jill said.

"I'll watch from the south shore," Woodville said. "They'll have to work with a light, because it's darker than the inside of a snake out there, so one of us ought to spot them. The instant any of you are sure they're starting to bring up the body, put it on the air to me, and I'll phone the sheriff. He's standing by for my call, so he should get there just about in time to catch them with the corpus delicti."

"You'll phone him from where?" Kelly asked.

The bald man grinned at her in the darkness. "From my car. It has a radiophone in it. Okay, girls, let's get going."

Kelly moved off to the right, Sabrina and Jill to the left. Within moments darkness swallowed all three from Woodville's sight. He pushed his way through underbrush to the edge of the water and crouched there to peer out over it.

Twenty-Two

Beau Creel parked the pickup truck on the access road fifty yards from the cabin, which was as close as he could get. They all helped carry the items from the back of the truck to the cabin. The building had no electricity, but there was a kerosine lamp on the table. Creel lighted it.

By the light of the lantern swarthy Abel Hicks stripped to his underwear, took off his shoes and socks, and put on the wet suit and the swim flippers. As he started to strap on the aqualung, Creel handed Rick Wilder the spade.

"There's a gully with a lot of underbrush in it diagonally across the road from the southeast corner of the swamp," Creel said. "Dig him a new grave there."

"That's a good hike," the freckled man said. "Can I take the pickup?"

"Okay. But you better drive without lights. We don't want to attract any attention."

As Wilder started from the cabin, he muttered to himself, "Could of let me go from there, instead of carrying this shovel fifty yards each way. Or at least we could of left it in the truck."

Back at the pickup truck he threw the spade in back and climbed behind the wheel. He continued along the narrow access road until it came out at the east edge of the vineyards, and turned south on the two-lane public road there to drive alongside the swamp. He drove slowly, the car engine making little noise, and without lights. Just beyond the intersection at the southeast corner of the swamp he cut across to

the left side of the road and pulled off onto the shoulder.

It wasn't until he had cut the engine and climbed out that it occurred to him that the only light they had brought along was back at the cabin. He walked over to gaze down dubiously into the underbrush-clogged ravine where he was supposed to dig a grave, wondering how infested with snakes it was. Then he shrugged and returned to the truck for the shovel.

He was reaching for it when he spotted two cars parked across the road diagonally, a few yards west of the intersection. He immediately assumed they contained couples who had picked that isolated spot as a lovers' lane. More irritated than alarmed, he walked over to run them off before they accidentally witnessed something they shouldn't see.

It was too dark to make out what type cars they were until he got close, but his irritation turned to wariness when he recognized the rear car as the yellow Lincoln Continental Janet LeMaire had been driving. It was empty. Cautiously he approached the Chevrolet parked in front of it, which also proved to be empty. Probably the Chevy wouldn't have struck him as familiar, too, if he hadn't recognized the other car, because there was nothing unique about it; but with his suspicions aroused by the Lincoln's presence, he realized the smaller car was identical to the one in which he had seen Scott Woodville arrive at the mansion for dinner some hours previously. Peering inside, he saw that it was equipped with a radiophone.

Gazing around in all directions, his hand gripping the thirty-eight revolver thrust into his belt, Wilder could see no one, and could hear nothing except the sounds of the swamp denizens.

After thinking things over, he released his grip on the gun butt, took a jackknife from his pocket, clicked it open, and reached through the open front window of the Chevy. Shutting the knife again and putting it away, he faded behind the thick trunk of

an elm a few feet from the shoulder of the road, and waited.

Standing next to a similar tree on the east bank of the swamp, Kelly peered out across the dark water. She could see no sign of activity and could hear nothing but the croaking of frogs and the sounds made by other night creatures of the swamp. A few minutes earlier she had heard a car drive past on the road behind her, but had heard the sounds of no other traffic.

On the west bank Sabrina crouched between two bushes, also vainly probing the darkness. On the north shore, about twenty-five yards west of the cabin, Jill had taken a position in some reed grasses at the edge of the water. She lay prone, because the grass was only a couple of feet high.

Jill was close enough to the cabin to see three men file from it and move toward the water, but not close enough to make out in the darkness which three of the four who had been in the truck it was. She did catch the silhouette of the aqualung strapped to the back of one, however, and by his awkward gait deduced that he was wearing swim flippers on his feet. Then the three men were swallowed in darkness, and she could only hear their activity. She heard a skiff being pushed into water, then the creaking of oarlocks.

The boat sounded as though it were being rowed south and west. Rising to her feet, Jill jogged back to the east shore of the swamp, and south along it for a short distance until she heard the splash of the oars only a few yards offshore, and seemingly headed her way. Crouching behind a bush, she waited. She wondered if Sabrina could hear the oars also. She had left Sabrina no more than fifty yards south of where she now was.

Out in the boat Beau Creel was rowing. Abel Hicks, in the wet suit with the aqualung strapped to his back, sat in the rear. Henry Bancroft was perched uneasily in the prow seat.

"How do you expect to find the spot in this pitch darkness?" the lawyer asked in a shaky voice.

"I know where I'm going," Creel told him. "I've been here before, remember."

He momentarily shipped oars to peer around, then nodded to himself, dipped them in the water again, and changed direction slightly. Seconds later he shipped the oars again, and allowed the skiff to drift alongside a dead tree stump which thrust leafless branches into the air. Slipping a line over one of the branches, he brought the boat to a gently rocking halt.

"About six feet north of the base of this stump," Creel said, "He's tied to an old plow."

Hicks put on his goggles and adjusted his breathing equipment. Picking up the underwater lamp, he slipped over the back end of the skiff and disappeared beneath the water. The boat was surrounded by an eerie green glow as he switched on the lamp near the bottom.

On shore Jill saw the glow of light directly opposite where she was crouched and only about twenty yards offshore. She could clearly see the faces of Beau Creel and Henry Bancroft in the greenish glow. Both men were peering down into the murky but illuminated depths.

Switching on the radio, Jill said in a whisper, "Woodville? Answer low, because I'm pretty close to them."

"What is it?" Woodville's voice came from the speaker, also in a whisper.

"Creel and Bancroft are in a skiff tied to a stump only about twenty yards from me. A third man is underwater with a lamp.

Sabrina's low-toned voice said from the speaker, "I can see that glow, too, but I can't make out what it is from here."

Kelly's voice, also low toned, said, "I don't see anything. I must be too far away."

"Where are you, Jill?" Woodville asked.

"On the west shore, about a third of the way south."

"I'll call the sheriff," Woodville said. "All of you stay where you are and don't take any chances."

Clicking the radio back to "receive," Woodville rose from his crouched position and pushed his way through the underbrush back to his car. Reaching through the open window, he lifted the phone from its bracket. Then he stared at the six-inch length of cord dangling from it.

Behind him a voice said, "You've been disconnected."

Spinning, Woodville swung the phone at the jaw of the man who had sneaked up behind him. The man jerked his head back quickly enough so that the instrument barely grazed his chin, then stepped in and smashed the barrel of the pistol in his hand alongside Woodville's head. The bald man collapsed like a dropped sack of grain.

Rick Wilder gazed thoughtfully down at the citizen's band radio the unconscious man had dropped, with its extended antenna. He picked it up to examine it more closely, then carried it over to again take up a position next to the tree he had previously been hiding behind.

Out on the water the underwater light stopped moving and stayed in the same position for some moments. Then it rose to the surface and Abel Hicks's goggled head appeared alongside the boat.

Taking the breathing tube from his mouth, the diver said to Creel, "Hand me the wire cutters and the line."

The blond man handed him the cutters and one end of the coil of rope lying in the bottom of the skiff. As the diver disappeared again, Creel fed more rope overboard until the line became slack.

The underwater light remained motionless on the bottom for some minutes. Then it again rose to the surface and Hicks's head reappeared. Handing Creel the lamp, still switched on, he pulled himself aboard. He took off his goggles and slipped out

of the aqualung harness. Then he moved to the center of the boat to help Creel and Bancroft pull up what he had tied to the end of the rope.

Even with three of them hauling on the rope, the burden rose from the bottom reluctantly. When it reached the surface, it could be seen by the light of the still burning lamp, now on the center seat, to be about six feet long by two thick. It was wrapped in a piece of canvas tarp, circled in three places with heavy wire. It was covered with seaweed.

The three men pulled it over the side of the boat and dropped it on the bottom behind the middle seat. Bancroft immediately returned to the narrow prow seat, where he sat breathing heavily and looking ill.

"Spoil your appetite, Henry?" Creel inquired sardonically. "You should have been here the night he went in."

On shore Jill had been watching the salvage operation with fascination. Now she whispered into the radio, "They've got it up, Woodville. Where's the sheriff?"

When that message came from the radio, Rick Wilder considered what he should do, then decided for the moment to do nothing. That hadn't been the voice of the girl he had been told was Janet LeMaire, but he assumed she was out there somewhere also, because her car was parked behind the Chevrolet. As both of them presumably would return to the car, Wilder decided the smartest thing he could do was simply wait.

Then a voice he recognized as that of the girl supposed to be Janet LeMaire came from the radio. "Woodville, why don't you answer Jill?"

After a long pause, a third voice he recognized as Kelly Garrett's said, "Sabrina, Jill, something's gone wrong. We'd better split."

The first voice said in a whisper, "We'll all meet at the cars."

Wilder continued to wait. After a time he heard a twig snap off to his right. Peering that way, he saw

a slim figure approaching. When it got near, he recognized it as Kelly Garrett, dressed in dark clothes and carrying a CB radio with the antenna extended.

Setting down his own radio, he waited until she was quite close before suddenly stepping out in front of her. She came to an abrupt halt, and her eyes grew enormous as she stared down the barrel of the gun aimed at her.

Twenty-Three

Sabrina was waiting for Jill at the spot where Jill had left her. Together the two hurried south along the bank.

When they rounded the southwest corner of the swamp and headed for the parked cars, they could dimly make out the slim figure of Kelly standing near a large elm. It wasn't until they got near that they realized she wasn't alone. A bulkier figure stepped from behind the tree trunk. A gun glinted in one hand, and he held one of the CB radios in the other. Sabrina and Jill abruptly halted thirty feet away.

The man with the gun spoke softly into the radio, his voice coming from the speakers of both girls' radios. "Keep right on moving, girls. Get over here and join your partner, or I'll put a bullet through her."

For a few seconds the girls remained frozen in place, then both continued on. Kelly gave them an apologetic look when they got close enough to see her face. By then they were also close enough to see that the man with the gun was the red-haired and freckled-faced Rick Wilder.

Indicating a CB radio on the ground at the base of

the tree, Wilder said, "You can stack your radios there, girls. You won't need them anymore."

Switching the instruments off and retracting the antennas, the girls obediently placed their radios next to Jill's. Wilder switched off his, too, and tossed it next to the others without bothering to retract the antenna.

"Now turn around and walk toward the water," the freckled man ordered all three girls. "Over there." He pointed to a section of bank that was clear of underbrush, about twenty yards west of the parked cars.

The girls preceded him over to the clear spot. Keeping them covered with his gun, the freckled man peered out over the water, at the same time bending his head to listen. After a few moments they could all hear the splash of oars and the creaking of oarlocks as the skiff approached.

"Creel?" Wilder called.

From the darkness Beau Creel's voice said, "Coming in, Rick. We've got it."

The skiff loomed out of the darkness, the underwater lamp no longer burning.

Wilder said, "Made a nice catch right here on shore."

Creel leaned back on the oars hard in order to drive the nose of the skiff up on the bank. Then he looked over his shoulder at the trio of girls standing under the freckled man's gun. Henry Bancroft was looking over his shoulder, too, and the man in the wet suit was gazing up from the rear of the boat.

Wilder said, "One fisherman and three pretty fish."

Bancroft climbed out on shore. Lifting his rifle from the bottom of the boat, Creel climbed out behind him. Abel Hicks stepped over the tarp-wrapped corpse to get out also.

After bleakly examining the three girls, Creel turned to Wilder. "What did you mean, one fisherman?"

"The lawyer." Wilder gestured in the direction of the two cars parked twenty yards away. "He had a

phone in his car, but I put it out of commission before he could call the sheriff. He's back by his car, out cold."

Creel said to Bancroft, "Stay here with the boat, Henry." Then he turned to the man in the wet suit. "Abel, come with me."

He headed for the cars, his rifle held at trail position. Abel Hicks followed along, and Wilder gestured for the girls to follow Hicks. The freckled man brought up the rear.

Scott Woodville groaned, sat up, and held his head just as they all arrived.

"He must have a head like a rock," Wilder said in surprise. "I conked him hard enough to put him out for an hour."

After briefly examining the groaning Woodville, Creel asked Wilder, "Any sign of the bird-watcher?"

Wilder shook his head. "Not a sign."

"He went back to Los Angeles," Kelly offered.

Creel looked at her with glittering eyes, then turned the glitter to the other two girls. "A con," he said softly. "It was all one big con."

In a bright voice Jill said, "Well, I guess you know there's really no oil."

Creel nodded slowly. "Yeah, I guess I know that." The glitter in his eyes turned to smoldering rage.

"What do we do with them?" Wilder asked.

Creel's nostrils flared. "We came to dig a grave. We'll make it a whole cemetery."

Sabrina said quickly, "If anything happens to us, you're out a quarter of a million dollars."

"Yes," Kelly put in. "We'll call Bosley in L.A. He'll bring it all back to save us."

Jill said, "That way nobody gets hurt."

Creel shifted his smoldering gaze from one to the other. After completing the circuit, he said in an icy monotone, "You weren't after the money, or you'd have been long gone. You're some kind of cops, or at least you're all playing at being cops. This whole con was set up to make me lead you to what's in the boat. With old man LeMaire's body you had

nothing. Now you've got murder one—you think. Only who're you going to tell about it?"

At the boat Henry Bancroft stood looking down at the canvas-wrapped corpse lying on the bottom of the skiff, a slightly ill expression on his face. Off to his left a dark-clad figure crept through the underbrush toward him.

When the figure was within a few feet of him, the lawyer sensed another presence and started to turn. But before he could complete the turn, an arm went about his neck from behind and a knee went into the middle of his back.

Bancroft managed to get out a terrified squeal before his breath was cut off by the encircling arm. When the squeal was heard by those at the cars, Creel snapped at Hicks. "Take care of Woodville," and headed back for the boat at a run.

Bancroft's attacker released his grip, delivered a stunning karate chop to the side of the lawyer's neck that dropped Bancroft in a dazed heap, and started to grab the nose of the boat with the apparent intention of pushing it away from shore, jumping in, and rowing away. But, realizing he would only make himself an easy target for Creel's rifle in the boat, he changed his mind and darted back into the underbrush.

Back at the parked cars Abel Hicks jerked the groggy Woodville to his feet, held the eight-inch blade of a hunting knife to his back, and prodded him toward the boat. Wilder gestured with his pistol for the girls to go that way, too.

They all arrived just as Bancroft dazedly rose to his feet. Beau Creel was peering down into the boat to make sure the canvas-wrapped corpse was still there instead of checking to see if the lawyer was injured.

"What happened?" Wilder asked Bancroft, his attention momentarily straying from the girls to fix on the lawyer.

That was all the break the girls needed. Bancroft was starting to say thickly, "Somebody jumped me,"

when Sabrina and Kelly suddenly dashed into the underbrush and disappeared from sight. As Wilder and Creel both swung their guns that way, Jill made a running dive into the water.

"Go after them!" Creel blazed at Wilder and Hicks in a voice of fury. "I'll take the one in the swamp!"

Wilder instantly ran into the underbrush after the two girls. After a momentary hesitation over what to do about Woodville, Hicks seemed to decide that Creel could take care of him, and ran after Wilder.

"Down on your belly!" Creel snarled at Woodville, giving him a savage shove in the back.

As Woodville spread-eagled himself on the ground, Creel picked up a thick, tapering piece of dead branch about the size of a softball bat and handed it to Bancroft. "If he tries to get up, knock his brains out," he said grimly.

Then he jumped into the boat, switched on the lantern, and began shining it around the water in search of Jill.

Sabrina and Kelly reached the southwest corner of the swamp and ran north through the heavily wooded area there that divided the swamp from the vineyards. Behind them they could hear pounding footsteps, rapidly nearing.

"Let's split up!" Sabrina gasped. "Maybe one of us can make to a phone and call the sheriff."

Nodding, Kelly veered off to the left. Sabrina continued on straight ahead.

While he couldn't see his quarry in the darkness, Rick Wilder was close enough behind the girls to hear their movements and realize what they had done. Momentarily he paused in his headlong pursuit to allow Abel Hicks to catch up with him. When the swarthy man came bounding along, in his wet suit looking like something out of a Japanese horror film, Wilder pointed off to the left.

"They split!" he said. "Go that way!"

Then he continued on straight ahead, while Hicks cut off to the left.

Winded from running, Sabrina came to a gasping halt next to a thick-boled tree and listened for sounds of pursuit. Apparently her pursuer was now winded, too, because she could hear him panting some distance back, and it sounded as though he was now moving only at a fast walk instead of at a run. She started to move on when a hand suddenly reached out from behind the tree to grasp her bicep and jerk her behind the tree. Another hand clasped across her mouth cut off her squeal of fright.

Her eyes fearfully moved sideways to the profile of the man holding her. She found herself looking at the handsome features of Aram Kellegian, a wolf grin on his face.

"If you stop running and just stay still, he'll never find you," he whispered in her ear. "Stay right here. I'll be back as soon as I collect your friend."

He released his double grip on her and slid off into the darkness.

Sabrina heard her pursuer moving closer, still breathing heavily but no longer panting. Afraid that her own breathing would give her away, she did her best to quiet it.

Peering around the tree trunk, she spotted her pursuer as the man came to a halt twenty feet away and gazed around in all directions. Her impulse was to resume running, but remembering Aram's instructions, she forced herself to remain where she was and stay still. She drew back her head so that he couldn't see her if he happened to glance that way, but then she couldn't see him, either.

She could hear him, however. He moved past the tree no more than three feet from her while she circled around it, always keeping the trunk between them, stepping carefully so as not to give away her presence by crunching a leaf or snapping a twig.

Meantime Kelly had become just as winded as Sabrina. And she could hear her pursuer steadily gaining on her. Coming to a large fallen tree trunk, she scrambled over it, then suddenly could run no

farther. Dropping flat, she pressed her body full-length against the other side of the log and attempted to restrain her heavy breathing.

Hicks came crashing through the underbrush in his wet suit, vaulted on top of the fallen log, and stood there panting, gazing around in all directions. There was no sign of the girl he had been chasing, but he was sure she was nearby, because her flight had been far from silent, and the sudden cessation of sound could mean only that she had decided to hide instead of running farther.

He listened, and as his own breathing gradually came under control, he heard other heavy breathing coming from directly beneath him. Glancing down, he saw Kelly huddled against the log.

Dropping down next to her, he showed her the knife.

"All right, up!" he ordered.

Twenty-Four

As Kelly climbed to her feet, she caught sight of a dark-clothed figure gliding toward Hicks from behind. Warned by her expression, the man in the wet suit spun around just in time to take a right hook squarely on the chin that made his eyes cross. For a moment he stood swaying, then toppled over on his back like a falling timber.

Aram Kellegian stooped to pluck the hunting knife from the unconscious man's lax grip. Reversing it to hand it to Kelly haft first, he asked, "Think if he wakes up before I get back, you can keep him under control with this?"

"Sure," she said, accepting the knife and kneeling

next to Hicks. Touching the sharp blade to the recumbent's man's throat, she smiled up at Aram "I'll tell him if he moves, I'll cut off his head. Where are you going?"

"To net his partner. I'll try not to be long."

He glided off into the underbrush again.

Sabrina heard Rick Wilder halt a short distance past her hiding place, then there was silence except for the man's heavy breathing. He knew she was concealed somewhere nearby, she realized, and was waiting for her to give herself away by making some sound.

She nearly jumped out of her skin when a voice so low it was barely a whisper of sound said in her ear, "Let him take you, then lead him beneath the tree just behind this one."

She turned to look up in Aram's face, then glanced beyond him at the huge elm about twenty feet away. Aram backed toward the elm, carefully keeping the trunk of the tree screening Sabrina from Wilder between him and Wilder too. He reached the elm and slipped out of sight behind it.

Sabrina waited a couple of minutes for Aram to get set, then examined the ground at her feet until she spotted a bent twig. Deliberately she snapped it underfoot.

Instantly Rick Wilder stepped around the tree and covered her with his gun. "Okay," he said triumphantly. "Back to the boat."

Letting her shoulders sag with dejection, Sabrina turned south, passing close to the big elm tree. She let her gaze shift sideways as she went by, and got a shock when she saw that Aram wasn't waiting there. She walked on, Wilder only a step behind her with the gun aimed at her spine.

A dark figure dropped onto Wilder's back from the lower branches of the tree, knocking the man flat. The gun went skittering.

The big red-haired man rolled like a cat, breaking Aram's bear hug and bringing a grunt from the younger man as he lashed out with a foot and

caught Aram in the chest. Aram rolled away, then both men leaped to their feet to fall in crouches and begin to circle each other warily.

"Bout's over," Sabrina announced. "Go back to your corners."

Both men glanced her way, then straightened up when they saw she had picked up the gun and was leveling it at Rick Wilder.

Back at the south shore Beau Creel had pushed the skiff away from the bank and was standing in it, poling the boat with one oar while he used the other to shine the light on the water. Jill had swum out as far as her held breath would take her, had surfaced long enough to see the boat with its probing light headed her way, then had dived again to swim over behind a rotting stump that was cut off only about a foot above the surface of the water.

Unfortunately for Jill, there was nowhere else in the immediate area where she could possibly have found concealment, which made it easy for Creel to pinpoint her position. When he started to pole the boat around to her side of the stump, she gripped an underwater stub of a branch, took a deep breath, and submerged.

The moment the light was no longer on her, Jill surfaced again. The boat was continuing to circle the stump, and Creel's back was now to her.

When he had made a complete circle without spotting the girl, Creel shined the light around in all directions, then returned the beam to the stump. Muttering aloud, "She *has* to be hiding here," he began to pole the skiff around in another circle.

He made three complete circles, and each time Jill took a deep breath just before the light beam hit her, gripped the submerged branch stub, and pulled herself underwater until the boat had passed over her head. But the fourth time the skiff began its slow circle, the beam focused on a white hand just below the surface, gripping the stub of tree branch.

Creel stuck the oar into the slime of the bottom in order to bring the skiff to a halt. Then he pulled

it free, dropped it in the bottom of the boat, and picked up his rifle. He clicked off the safety just as Jill was forced to come up for breath. She looked up to see him aiming the gun one-handed directly at her head. She could tell by his expression that he intended to squeeze the trigger, and braced herself for the bullet to smash through her brain.

From shore a deep voice magnified by a bullhorn called, "Beau Creel! It's Sheriff Hopkins! Come on in!"

Creel froze with his finger on the trigger. Then, flicking the safety back on and turning the lamp off, he dropped both in the bottom of the boat and stooped to grab the skiff's grisly cargo with the intention of heaving it overboard.

As he half lifted the heavy canvas shroud, a powerful spotlight pinned him in its glow, causing him to freeze again.

"Too late, Creel!" the sheriff's voice called through the bullhorn. "Drop it and come on in! Don't try anything at all, because you're thoroughly covered."

Creel let the body fall back into the bottom of the boat. Seating himself, he picked up the oars and slowly began to row back to shore.

Jill swam after the boat. On shore there was now a bright glow of light from the headlights of three vehicles and from the spotlights attached to two of them. A large number of people seemed to be milling around.

Kelly's voice called, "Jill, are you all right?"

"Fine," Jill called back, continuing to swim.

Creel beached the boat and stepped ashore just as Jill waded from the water. In addition to the sheriff, there were half a dozen deputies armed with riot guns, two of whom were in the act of loading Wilder, Hicks, and Bancroft into a paddy wagon. Another slipped handcuffs on Creel and led him toward the paddy wagon as still another deputy handed Jill a blanket to throw around her wet shoulders.

In addition to all those people, Woodville, Sabrina,

Kelly, Aram Kellegian, and a middle-aged Mexican-American man were all standing around.

Woodville was saying to Aram, "Not that we aren't grateful, Mr. Kellegian, but what were you doing out here?"

"Trying to slow 'em down," Aram said. He nodded toward the Mexican-American. "I sent Miguel into town for the sheriff."

"How'd you know we'd be here?" Sabrina asked curiously.

"Got a phone call about an hour ago, clear from Los Angeles. Fellow was really worried. Said if anything went wrong, someone would have to bail you out, and suggested I be that someone. You people know a guy called Charlie?"

Kelly and Sabrina looked at each other and started to laugh. Sabrina called to Jill, who was just moving over toward them after wrapping the blanket about her, "Jill, you'll never guess who ordered the sheriff."

Casually, as though there couldn't be any doubt, Jill said, "Charlie, I suppose. Who else?"

Woodville drove the sopping-wet Jill back to her hotel. Kelly and Sabrina had to return to the mansion for their luggage and Kelly's motorcycle. They went in the Lincoln, followed by two deputies in one of the sheriff's cars. They left the two deputies in the living room while they went upstairs to awaken Rachel and tell her she had company.

Kelly tried Rachel's bedroom door, found it unlocked, opened it, and switched on the light. Rachel's eyes opened to blink at the two girls standing in the doorway.

"Goods news, Rachel," Kelly announced sweetly. "You're not going to have to have your husband declared legally dead after all. His body's turned up."

"What!" the woman said, sitting straight up in bed.

Sabrina said chattily, "It was out in the swamp, tied to an old plow. And now it's in the county

morgue. Incidentally, there's a couple of deputy sheriffs downstairs who want to talk to you."

"Deputy sheriffs?" Rachel repeated in a numb voice.

"Yes, those fellows who wear the pretty tan uniforms," Kelly said. "I suggest you get dressed and pack an overnight bag before you go down, because I don't think you'll be coming back up."

The two girls turned and went along the hallway to their own rooms to pack their belongings.

The three angels were all lined up on the sofa in the office in Beverly Hills. Scott Woodville leaned against the bar with a cold drink in his hand, and John Bosley was running the projection machine. Bosley pressed the button of the slide changer and the color photograph of a young and beautiful girl about the age of the angels appeared on the screen.

Charlie's voice said from the squawkbox, "And this, angels, is our client, the real Janet LeMaire."

Kelly asked, "What about the quarter of a million, Charlie?"

"Janet LeMaire wanted that to be our fee. After all, we proved they killed her father, and we made sure they didn't kill her. Nobody believed her story. Except me. Bosley?"

Another slide clicked into place. It showed Janet LeMaire and Aram Kellegian standing on the steps of the mansion at Samarra, smiling at each other.

Charlie's voice said, "You'll be glad to hear that Janet LeMaire and Aram Kellegian recognized each other at once. And the first thing she's going to do is build a barn down by the river. All right, Bosley, that's it."

The screen went blank, and Bosley turned off the projection machine and turned up the room lights.

"Well done, angels," Charlie's voice said.

The girls all murmured, "Thank you, Charlie."

"And you, Woodville."

"Thank you, Charlie," Woodville said.

There was a short silence. Bosley waited, a slight pout on his face.

"Oh, and you too, Bosley, of course."

Bosley's pout turned to a beam. "Thank you, Charlie."

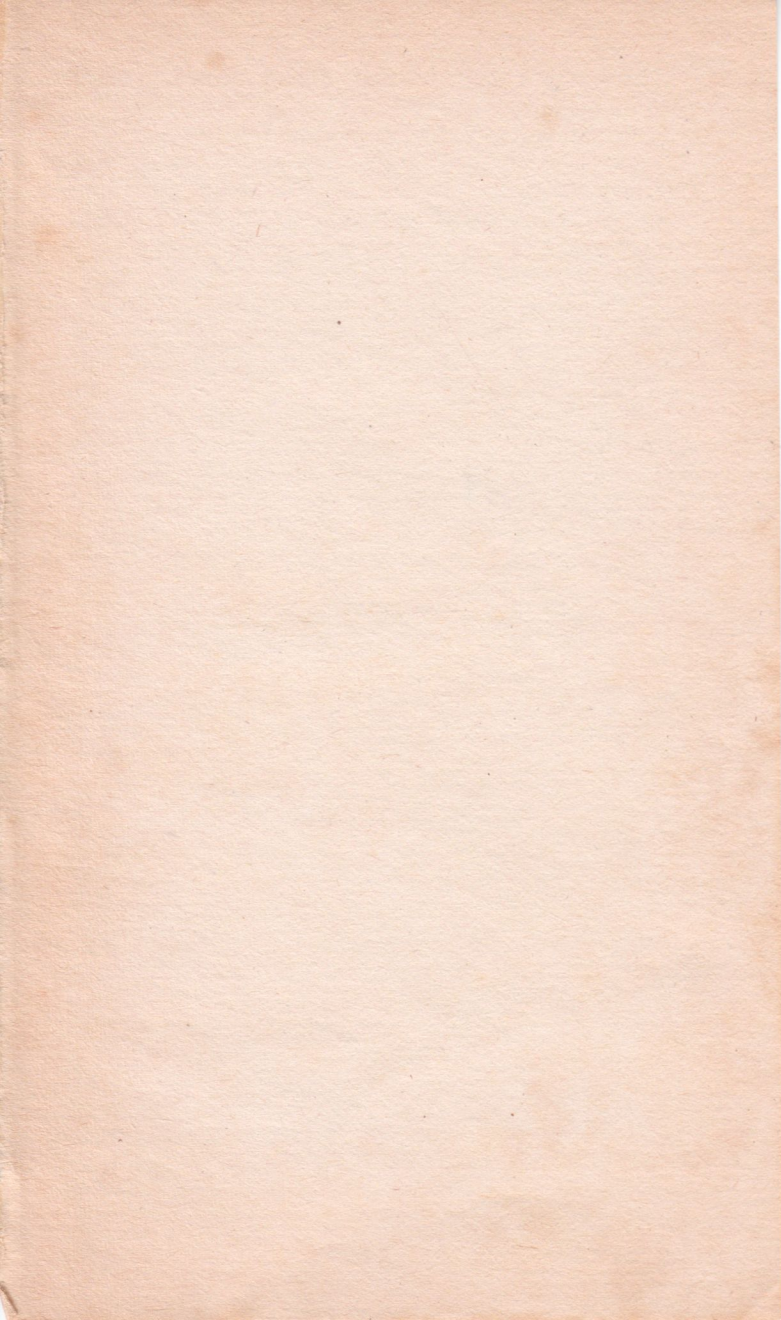
The voice from the squawkbox said, "Well, that's it until next time. Now I'd better get back to the job at hand."

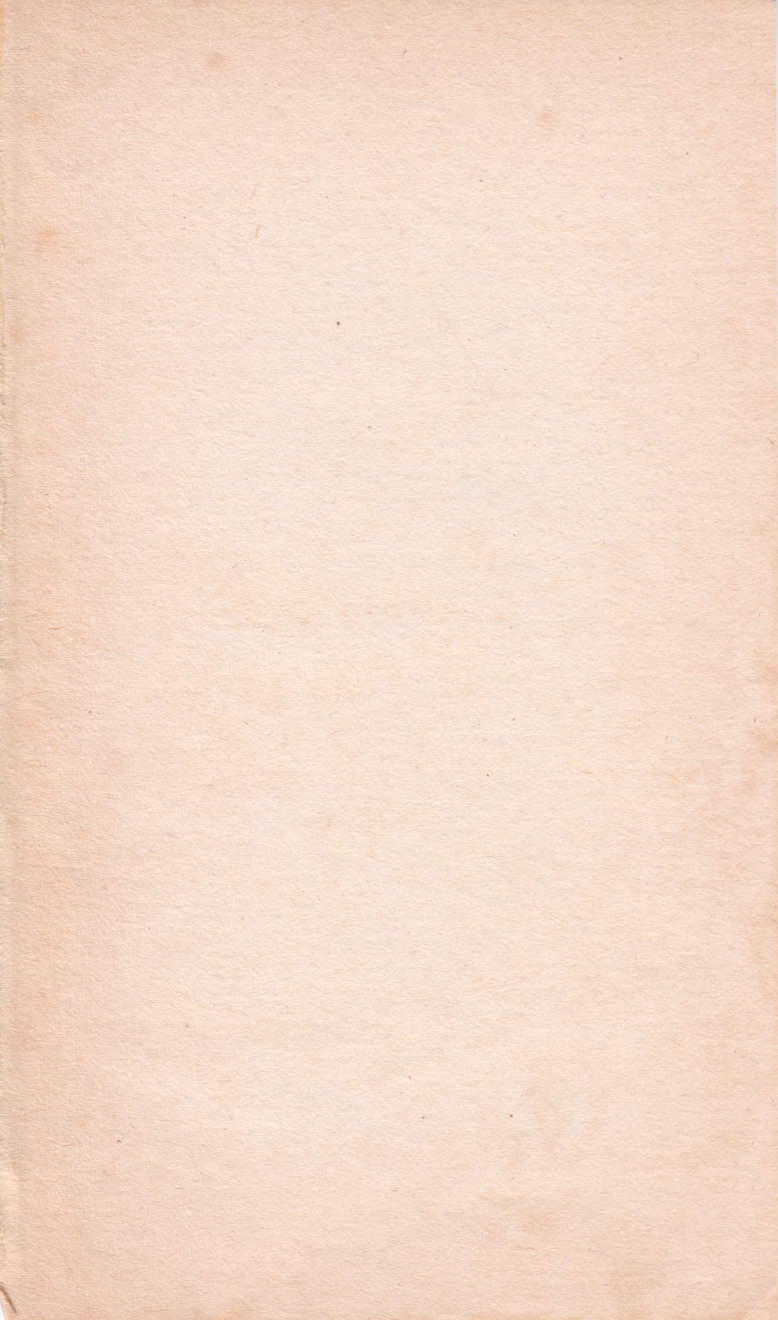
"What's that, Charlie?" Jill asked curiously.

"Same old thing. Burning the midnight oil. Bearing down on our next case. Believe me, it's a real scorcher."

It was, too, because he was in a Turkish bath. As he hung up the phone, a throaty feminine voice said, "Here you are, Charlie," and a hand appeared through the curtain of steam, thrusting a tall glass at him.

Accepting it, Charlie said, "Bless you, my dear."





WHERE CHARLIE'S ANGELS RUSH IN, FOOLS SHOULD FEAR TO TREAD!

Charlie loves a mystery. Why not? He's one himself. And when this elegant, enigmatic genius has a suitably provocative puzzler he calls on Kelly, Jill and Sabrina—three curvaceous crime-stoppers whose brains, beauty, and bravura are at his beck and call.

Now a secret client has brought Charlie a vintage case of wine country conspiracy that sends his charming charges into action—to save a fortune in grapes and solve a murder that's waited seven years for a multi-million dollar payoff.

A Devilishly Clever Adventure Novel

Charlie's Angels

A SPELLING-GOLDBERG PRODUCTION

Starring

KATE JACKSON

FARRAH FAWCETT-MAJORS

JACLYN SMITH

and

DAVID DOYLE

Created and written by

IVAN GOFF

and

BEN ROBERTS